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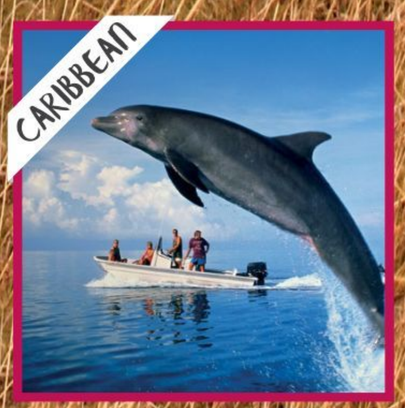
EPIC ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS & STUNNING TRAVEL LOCATIONS

Ultimate WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME ADVENTURES FOR ANIMAL LOVERS EVERYWHERE

MAASAI MARA RESERVE
Kenya
AFRICA











Digital Edition

FUTURE

FIRST EDITION

Ultimate WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

Welcome

Whether you're an animal lover or an adventure-seeking wanderer, there's nothing more exhilarating than seeing wild animals in their natural habitat. Sometimes we stumble upon them by chance – perhaps a leisurely stroll along a beach leads to an incredible display of turtles hatching – other times we spend months planning to increase our odds of spotting a particular creature in the wild. There are often no guarantees when you set out on a wildlife adventure, but this challenge can be half the fun. And the fact you're in an amazing location adds to the whole experience! Turn the page to discover where you can find certain animals, and what wildlife you can expect to see in specific countries, complete with travel advice, animal-spotting tips and stunning imagery. Start planning your next adventure today!





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Ultimate WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

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Getting back to nature

With many of the world's most iconic animals close to the brink, could wildlife watching and conservation tourism hold the key to reversing their fortunes?

Words **Adam Millward**





Wildlife holidays are different from your average vacation. Barring the odd unforeseen delay or force majeure, you generally know what you're going to get before embarking on a trip. On a city break, you can expect to see the most famous landmarks and museums. On a cruise, you'll receive the full itinerary of stops and entertainment programme before you step on board. Even lovers of the great outdoors, which can be more unpredictable, can be confident that the mountain you want to climb or beach you want to sunbathe on will be where the guidebook says it will be.

But for a wildlife experience, you're signing up to an unwritten contract with Mother Nature: an understanding that there are never any guarantees. When the time comes to head back, you may have come no closer to that dreamed-of encounter than if you'd stayed at home; at least there, you could have enjoyed your favourite creatures in the latest Attenborough series, all from the comfort of your sofa.

Which begs the question: why would we risk our hard-earned money and precious time on something with no certainty of success? For anyone who has been lucky enough to see animals in the wild, you'll know the answer is simple, albeit difficult to put your finger on. That feeling when you catch a glimpse of wildlife in its natural habitat is as hard to describe as it is to beat.

Think outside the box

There's a common tendency to divide people into animal lovers and non-animal lovers. In reality, that's a bit like saying you're a music person or you're not. While you'd be hard-pressed to find fans of every genre, there's equally few who can say they don't have a soft spot for at least some kind of music.

Similarly, when deciding whether a nature holiday is for you, don't fall into the trap of thinking in narrow terms. For every package holiday in a lodge on the African savanna or snorkelling trip on the Great Barrier Reef, there are plenty of alternatives waiting to be discovered, miles away both from the clichés, both geographically and figuratively.

For instance, who says Africa holds a monopoly over the safari? There are many other biodiversity hotspots to be explored from South America's Pantanal, the world's largest wetland and one of the best places to see jaguars; Sri Lanka, which has its very own 'Big Five', including Asian elephants, sloth bears and blue whales; Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park – described as 'North America's Serengeti'; to the coast of the Black Sea, which is a haven for avifauna. For something totally different, you could even go on an Arctic safari in search of polar bears and reindeer.

The same applies to keen divers and snorkellers. Why go long haul to the other side of the planet when you could reduce costs and your carbon footprint by staying closer to home? The waters off Scotland's coast are surprisingly rich with sealife, with everything from starfish to basking sharks, while at the opposite end of the UK, the warmer waters around the Scilly Isles boast coral and colonies of playful seals.

Even those with their hearts set on classic wildlife destinations like Kenya or South Africa (let's not forget, they're classics for a reason!) should remember that the traditional jeep isn't the only option. Why not get a bird's-eye view from a hot-air balloon, opt for paddle power in a canoe, or even channel your inner cowboy/girl and enjoy Africa's greatest wildlife hits from horseback?

Wherever you end up, don't forget to enjoy the culture and scenery too. Peppering your holiday with non-wildlife-focused activities – an afternoon ziplining, a cookery class, a side-trip to a folk market or some ancient ruins – really helps to alleviate the stress when animal sightings might not be going your way.

Do your homework

When it comes to getting the most out of any wildlife experience, research is a must – this isn't one of those times when you can 'wing it' when you get there like you might get away with on a city break. Both the timing and location are critical to success. That said, no amount of guidebooks or travel blogs can compare to local knowledge. A guide can seem like an unnecessary extravagance, or some travellers may see it as a threat to their autonomy, but if looking to track down native fauna, recruiting someone familiar with the area can make all the difference. Choose the right guide and they will know the precise tree that a pair of macaws nests in every year, the waterhole that never dries out in the dry season, and so many other invaluable insights.

Of course, the operative word here is picking the *right* guide – and that, once again, comes down to research. Beyond doing basic due diligence by reading reviews, there are some tell-tale signs of whether a tour operator takes their environmental responsibilities seriously. Are they transparent about where your money is going? At least a percentage should be invested directly into conservation or back into the local community to encourage sustainable



Images: Getty Images

ecotourism. Are unreasonable promises of up-close encounters being made? Wild animals never ask to be hugged, ridden on or have overly intrusive selfies. Does it seem suspiciously below the price offered by similar operators? Generally, if your instinct tells you that something seems too good to be true, it probably is. If still in doubt, there are bodies such as the Coalition for Ethical Wildlife Tourism that can offer advice (**worldanimalprotection.org/cewt**).

Don't forget that you bear a degree of personal responsibility too when entering wild domain: turn that phone to silent, keep your voice low and don't use sunscreen or bug spray with harmful chemicals. Remember, you're a guest in these animals' homes so treat them with respect: leave no litter behind and stick to paths to avoid unintentional damage.

Increase your odds

While it's true that Mother Nature holds a lot of the cards when it comes to encountering wildlife, there are, of course, ways to improve your chances. If you've done your homework, as suggested, you'll come to realise that many animals are creatures of habit – and that is something that can work to our advantage.

Migratory species do not run to a precise schedule, but many of their basic instincts, whether it's feeding or mating, are driven by the seasons. If you have a particular destination along a migration route in mind, look back over previous years' survey reports to get a better sense of their most likely ETA.

Some species make it easier for us than others, by hanging out in a specific location or having developed regular routines, which means we can predict their schedule almost to the minute. Ones that fulfil both criteria are a rare opportunity not to be missed. For instance, during winter, snow monkeys spend several hours each day around a set of natural hot springs in central Japan; just be prepared for the often icy forest path that leads up to pools.

Mass migrations are not only a spectacular sight to behold, but also fairly consistent in terms of timing. If you have a window of opportunity, aim to go between the middle and end when numbers should be at their peak. Take monarch butterflies, which descend in their millions across a few mountain forests of Mexico around mid-November and stay through to March; for the best chances of a show-stopping display, you should visit in January and February.

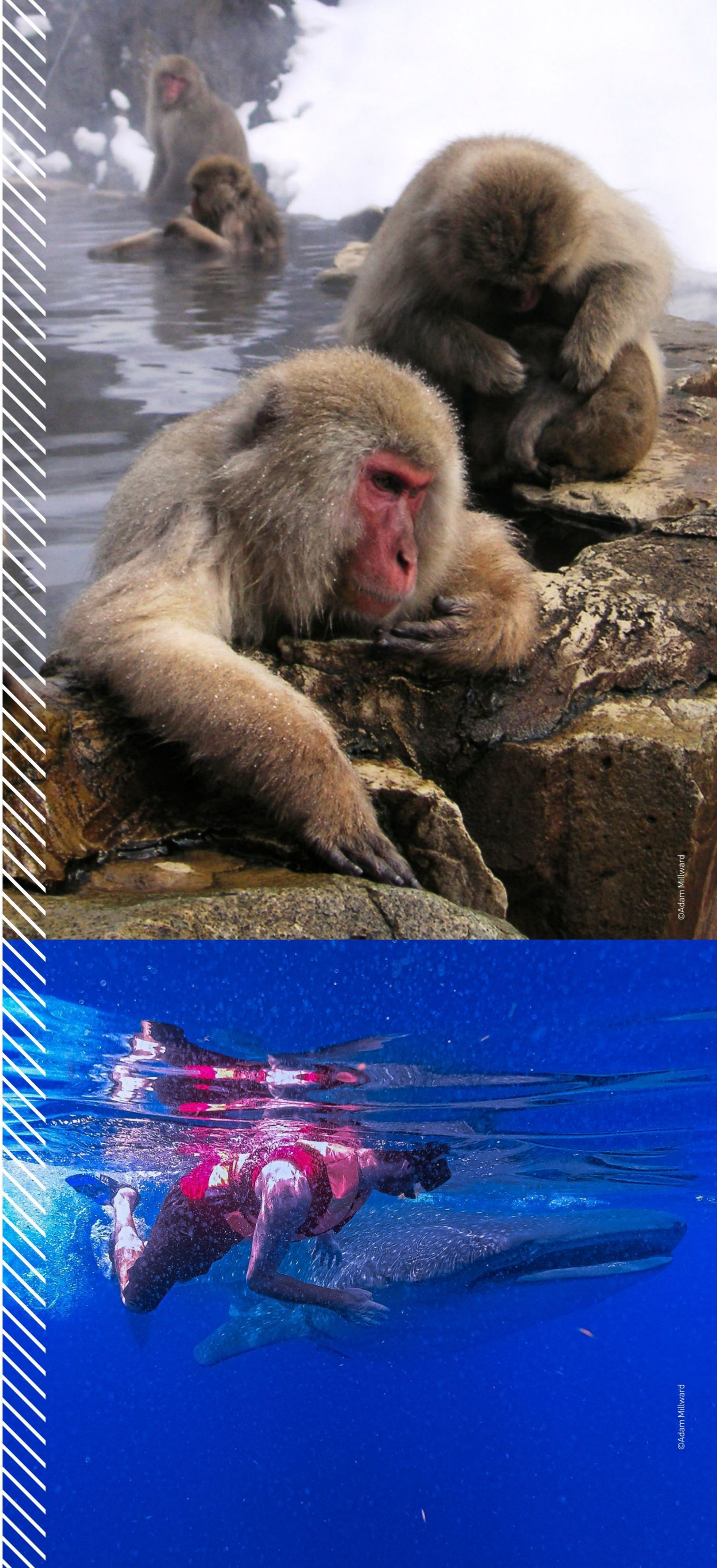
Flexibility is also a major advantage. The later you can leave booking your trip, the more informed you'll be on recent sightings or seasonal fluctuations like a severe storm or longer-than-usual dry season. National parks often keep track of animal movements within their boundaries online, so keep regular tabs on these. Better still, contact the park officials to get their recommendations on when to visit and any hotspots within the reserve where sightings are most frequent.

Next steps

Once you've determined whether or not a wildlife holiday is right for you, it's time to ask: are you the right kind of person for a wildlife holiday? Having come this far, you might assume this is a no-brainer, but it's worth the self-reflection at this point rather than realising halfway through the trip! Be honest with yourself. Have you got the patience to sit and wait for hours potentially in not very comfortable conditions like a hide? Are you prepared for mud, bugs, humidity and exposure to the elements? And can you deal with the fact that despite all the research you do, how good a guide you hire and how many mosquito bites you endure, you may not fulfil the aim of all that effort and hardship?

If the answer to any of these questions is an outright no, then perhaps you ought to reconsider. Just like opera or jazz is a personal taste, wildlife vacations are not for everyone, so come to peace with that. If you're undecided, then consider a trial run; plan a wildlife-watching weekend in your home country with a wish-list of things you'd like to see (make sure it's a mix of common and rarer species). It's a good way of honing those all-important research skills but also of seeing how you deal with the disappointments, as well as the exhilarating successes.

For those who are willing to sign that unwritten contract with Mother Nature, however, only one question remains: where in the world will you go first?





© Getty Images

Hands-on conservation

In 2019, a UN-backed report warned that up to one million animals and plants are at risk of extinction over the next few decades. It's a sobering thought that might inspire you to go beyond simply watching wildlife on your holiday. As more species come under threat, there is an ever-growing variety of volunteering opportunities around the globe. Whether it's working with orangutans in Indonesia, turtle hatchlings in Greece or bats in Costa Rica, the most important thing to remember before signing up is that you are there for the animals, and not the other way round. It might sound obvious, but if your top priority is capturing a cute selfie for Instagram, then you might want to reassess.

A big draw of conservation tourism is the chance to encounter wild animals at closer quarters than you would, say, on a safari. While this is true in many cases, don't forget that some of the most vital parts of the job involve no engagement with wildlife in the field. These organisations rely on fundraising, engaging with local communities, lobbying governments, habitat preservation and construction projects. The positive to take away from this is: you don't need to be a vet or have a zoology degree to make a difference. Evaluate the skills that you are best placed to offer – whether that's marketing, website building, teaching or team-management experience. That way, you can ensure you will be of the most benefit to the charity, and ultimately the animals you are seeking to help.



©Adam Jones

Iconic Animals

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Encounter wild elephants

Magnificent in every way, the world's largest land mammal is also one of the animal kingdom's most intelligent creatures, and you can see it with your very own eyes

Words **Amy Grisdale**

Travel expert

Justin Francis is the CEO and co-founder of Responsible Travel, and is one of *The Times'* 50 most influential people in travel

"The experience of seeing these huge, intelligent and untamed creatures in their natural habitat is breathtaking, and you'll learn far more in just a few minutes with a wild herd than you would from days with a captive elephant as you observe their natural behaviour. Seeing one of the world's largest land mammals move across the African savannah or shuffle through an Asian forest is unforgettable; the way an entire herd protects a tiny baby, the care with which desert elephants treat the scant vegetation they depend upon, or the heart-stopping mock charges if your vehicle happens to separate a herd crossing the road... few encounters can match it.

Another option is to volunteer, for instance, working with elephants rescued from logging or riding and given sanctuary in large enclosures rather than those that offer rides or performances."



African bush elephant
Found on the open savannah, this is the species safari-goers are most likely to spot wandering in large family groups or gathered near water.

African forest elephant
These animals are smaller and darker in colour than their plain-dwelling relatives, and navigate Congo's dense forests in groups of around four.

Sri Lankan elephant
This subspecies of the Asian elephant has suffered from colonisation, and is now mostly found in a handful of pockets of land.

Indian elephant
This elephant's range is not limited to the country after which it is named – Indian elephants graze on more than 100 different plant species throughout parts of mainland Asia.

Borneo pygmy elephant
300,000 years of evolution separate this species from other elephants, leaving it as the smallest elephant in Asia. It roams Borneo's forests, and there are only around 1,500 remaining.

Sumatran elephant
There are now fewer than 3,000 of these elephants in the wild, and 85% of their habitats are outside of protected areas.



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Travel guide

When to go
Elephants may be easiest to locate during or shortly after the wet season, as their footprints will be most visible then.

How to get there
You're most likely to need to fly to see elephants in the wild, and it's best to travel with a responsible tour company.

The weather
Wherever you go, it's going to be very hot. If you visit during rainy season, prepare to get wet on a daily basis.

What to take
Sun cream, insect repellent and a good hat for protection are the most essential things to take on an elephant trek.

When the babies arrive
Elephants are year-round breeders, so there's no set time to visit to see newborn calves. It's down to pure luck.

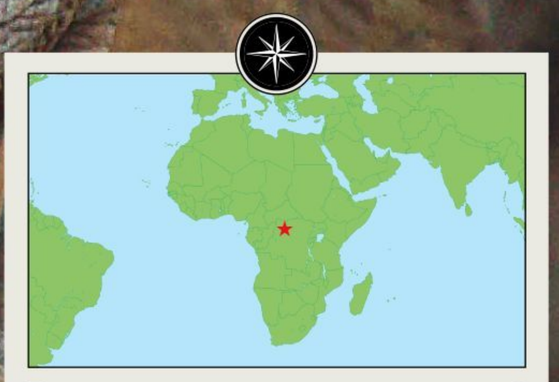
Witness unbreakable bush elephant bonds

Elephants experience perhaps the strongest relationships on Earth, and herds stay together for their entire lives. African bush elephant families comprise of up to 50 females of several generations, and the closely bonded animals graze, travel and search for water together. Males are expelled from the group once they reach sexual maturity to avoid inbreeding.

Adult males were once thought to be solitary, but in fact they form their own herds of bachelors when not in season. Males ready to mate will impregnate females before resuming their lives without the ladies.

Related elephants babysit for their siblings, and all the herd's adults pitch in to help raise the calves. The oldest and largest female takes charge, and her hard work strengthens the family unit. She defends the younger members of the group from predators and makes decisions about where to search for food and water.

When looking for elephants on safari, it is worth noting that they are often heard before they come into view. Adults crash through dense vegetation to allow the youngsters to follow, and they produce low-frequency rumbles in order to communicate over distance.



Ride denied

Elephants are enormous, but they're not the load-bearers one might think. Elephant spines are comprised of sharp, angular bones that protrude upwards, and the tissue between the vertebra and the outer layer of skin is extremely vulnerable to excess weight. Pressure from above can cause the animal extreme discomfort, and over time this can result in permanent spinal injury. If seeing wild elephants really isn't enough for you, there are walking and washing interactions at rehabilitation centres that don't involve riding or deviating from natural elephant behaviour at all.



©Getty Images; Alain Mafart-Renodier/Biosphoto/FLPA

Revere a real-life Indian deity

The elephant Hindu god Ganesha represents intellect and wisdom, and is said to remove obstacles. Indian elephants embody these values, and have become an intrinsic aspect of Indian life. Elephants have been domesticated over centuries and live alongside humans. This has been known to cause conflict between farmers and hungry heffalumps, but planting particularly fragrant crops or locating beehives around fields is enough to get elephants to look elsewhere.

Elephants are used in celebrations and festivals in India, but those wishing to see elephants in their natural surroundings are in luck. Around 60% of Asia's wild elephants are in India, and they are most densely populated in the southern tip of the country. However, their population has reduced by 50% over the last three generations due to human land use. If you can stand the heat, see these massive mammals in their native habitat before their home ranges shrink any more.



India



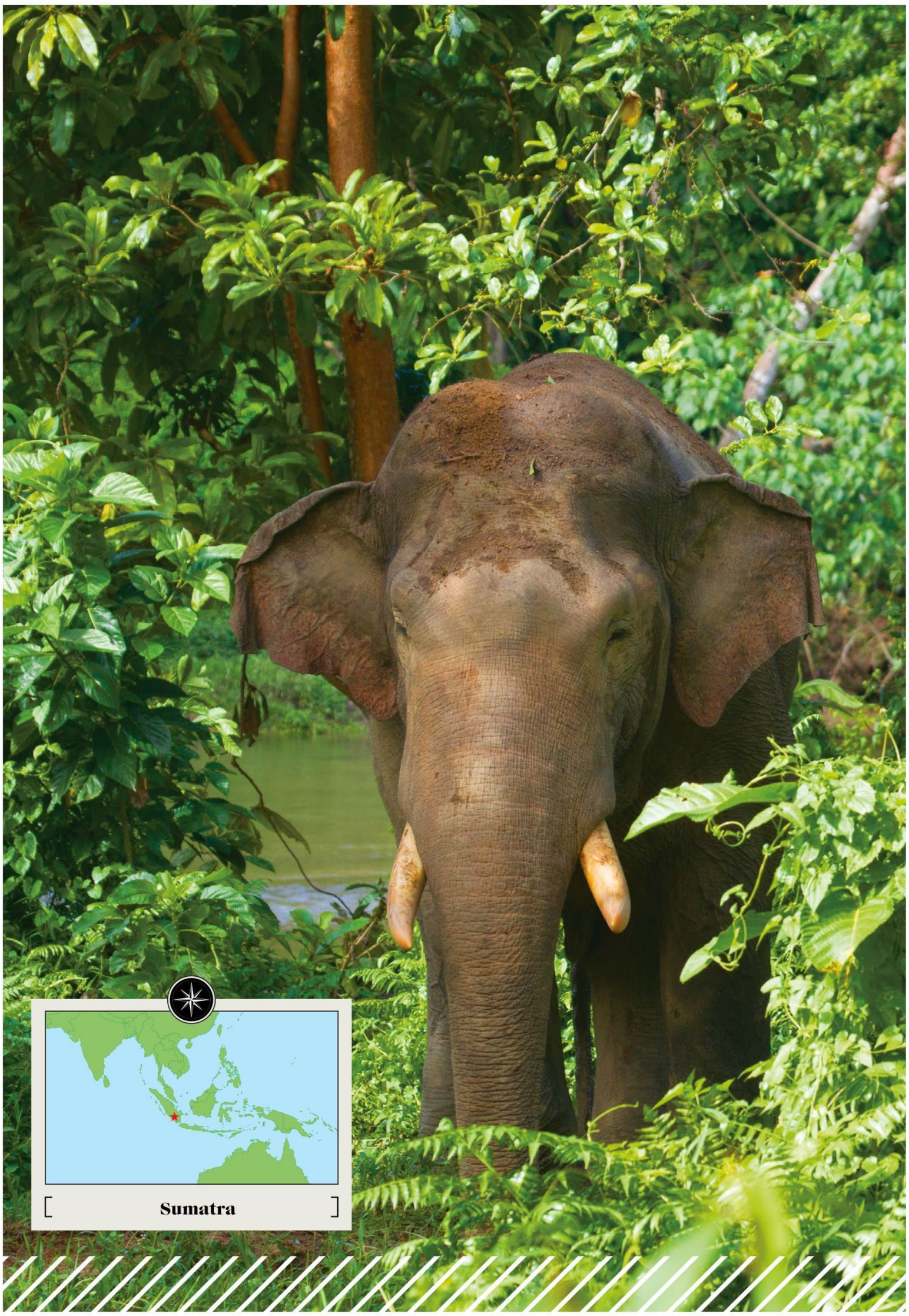
Sri Lanka

Watch elephants taking a dip

Whether it's a winding river, a great lake or an inland reservoir, water is extremely important to elephants. Thankfully, these animals are able to breathe through their long trunks just like a built-in snorkel.

When they're not riding the waves, Sri Lankan elephants can often be seen squelching around in muddy ponds and coating their skin with sun-repelling clay to cool down. This allows the animals to spend maximum time foraging in grassland under the hot sunshine.

It's important to avoid supporting elephant captivity masquerading as rehabilitation. Tourism is an extremely lucrative industry in Sri Lanka, and a great number of visitors are satisfied with paying for an elephant selfie. Animal-welfare advocates stress the importance of watching elephants in the wild rather than so-called 'orphanages' that exist purely to make money.

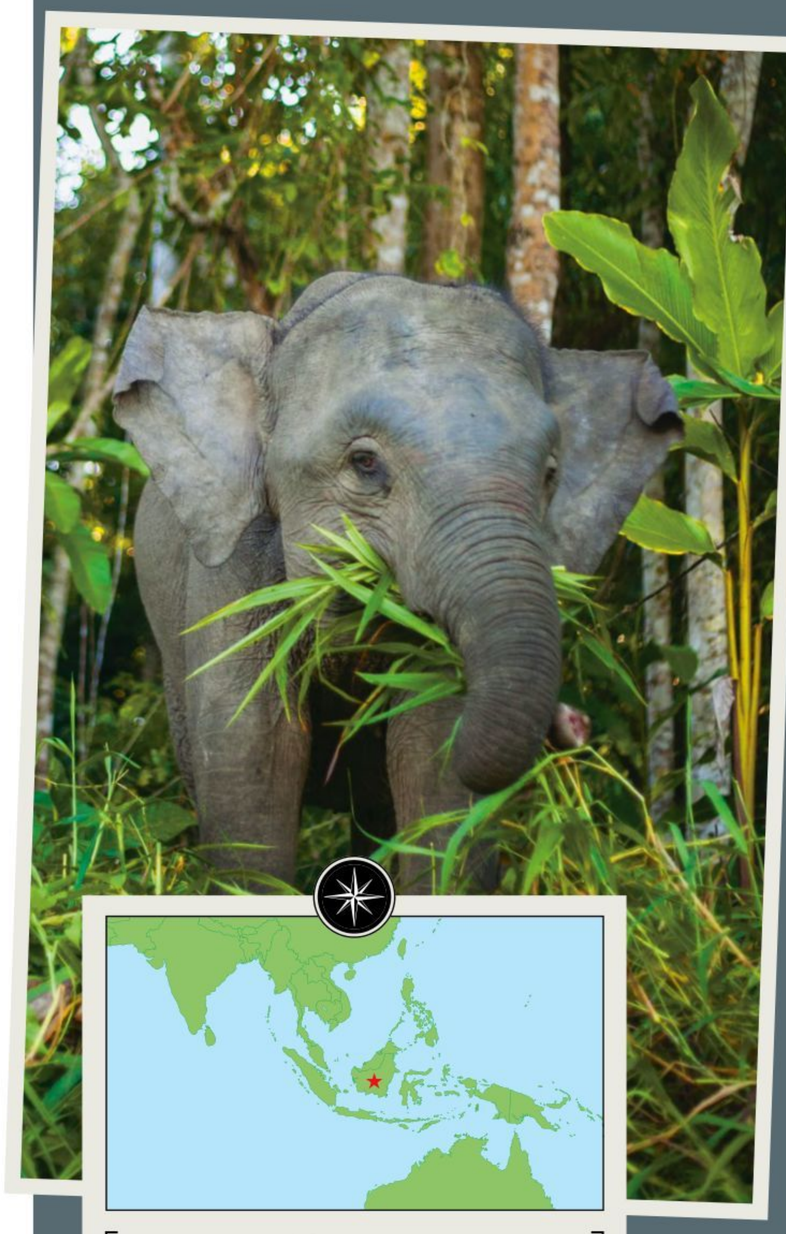


Glimpse elephants gardening

Indonesia's island of Sumatra is home to a huge array of endangered species, including tigers, orangutans and the Sumatran elephant. As a huge herbivore, these giants are responsible for depositing seeds around this fragile ecosystem. Not only do plants get to spread their roots as a result, but dropped seeds are mixed into a ready-made fertiliser in the form of elephant droppings.

Elephant dung also supports countless species of insects, providing a food source and a safe place for creepy crawlies to lay their eggs. Every animal in the food chain is extremely important, and allowing just one species to disappear could have huge repercussions for those that remain.

Sumatra has seen a human population surge in recent years, accompanied by a high demand for palm oil. This 'miracle' ingredient makes its way into thousands of products on Western supermarket shelves, but procuring it requires clearing native trees to make way for animal-unfriendly oil palm trees. Along with supporting ethical tourism to see wild elephants in Sumatra, you can help out at home by avoiding products with palm oil or ensuring they are sustainable.



Trudge through the jungle with pygmy elephants

The origin of this subspecies is the subject of some debate, but it is generally accepted that captive elephants were introduced to Borneo by the Sultan of Sulu in the 18th century. As a result of descending from domesticated animals, they are much tamer than other wild elephants, yet they still like to venture far and wide. While they would usually range across a territory spanning up to 400 square kilometres (155 square miles), in fragmented areas of jungle they can be forced to wander across 600 square kilometres (230 square miles) of terrain to find food.

Visitors to Borneo should travel with experienced guides. The island has overwhelming biodiversity that not everybody will be fortunate enough to encounter, but it's no walk in the park. Trekking the Bornean jungle is an exhausting and dangerous pursuit that should not be taken lightly. It's also very important to keep your distance from the friendly animals in order to prevent the elephants from losing their fear of humans entirely.

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Who to travel with

Eco-friendly
Responsible Travel
RESPONSIBLETRAVEL.COM

Elephant Conservation in Laos
Volunteer at a rehabilitation centre for rescued elephants, staying in on-site cabins. From £769pp ($987).

Family
Audley Travel
AUDLEYTRAVEL.COM

Botswana Family Safari Adventure
Enjoy guided tours around the Okavango Delta and the Kalahari. From £6,840pp (~$8,770) incl. flights.

Luxury
Elephant Hills Thailand
RAINFORESTCAMP.COM

Jungle Lake Safari
Feed and interact with elephants in Khao Sok National Park, staying in luxury canvas tents. From ~£590pp (~$760).

Spy forest elephants through the trees

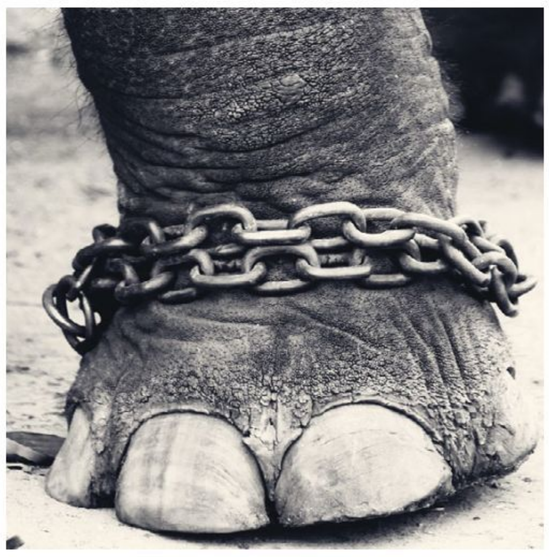
The straight, white tusks of this magnificent species help uproot trees and strip bark from trunks. These are both important food sources for this elusive elephant, along with leaves and various fruit. All of this roughage wears down their tough teeth, so these elephants grow six replacement sets throughout their lives.

Though concealed within thick woodland, predation is still a problem for elephants. Lions and hyenas will target a young calf that has strayed away from the family, and they will even attack a sickly adult. However, aside from these threats, forest elephants coexist with other species peacefully, and provide important services for other woodland creatures.

Elephants dig for water when it is scarce, benefitting a great number of other animals, and their propensity to charge through vegetation creates corridors for the rest of the forest's inhabitants, disperses seeds and fertilises the environment with their immense piles of dung.

Even elephant footprints are useful to Africa's ecosystem, with divots driven into swampy soil being able to hold up to 200 litres of water. Up to 61 different species have been recorded occupying these little lakes, which elephants provide simply by existing.

This species occupies four West African countries and can be spotted by the lucky few adventurous enough to explore the forests. This should only be attempted with reputable guides, as armed rangers patrol the woods to protect the animals from illegal poaching.



Warning signs

Chains
Elephants should never be shackled. If an elephant poses a danger to another animal or a human when it is not chained, it should not be in captivity. Don't hand over money to a facility that chains up its animals.

Rides
It's best to avoid tour operators that offer rides, even if you choose not to take a turn. Make a statement with where you put your cash, and don't reward anyone taking advantage of endangered elephants.

Touching
Wild elephants should be just that – wild. Elephants are perfectly capable of injuring or even killing a human if one strays too close. Touching wild elephants also sends the message that all humans are harmless, which is definitely not the case.

Feeding
Elephants spend up to 16 hours a day finding food, and being the middleman robs the animal of its daily drive. Nature provides everything an elephant needs, and while it may be an enjoyable experience for you, the animal won't thank you for feeding it.

Concrete
The wilderness is a place free from human-made objects, and there is no room for hard cement in an elephant's life. Stamping those giant feet is a form of elephant communication that the animals rely on to stay in contact.

Why elephant tourism matters
Travelling to a country to see elephants sends a strong message to the nation's policy makers. Your money is an economic incentive to protect elephants from poaching and provide a sustainable future for endangered animals. It is our responsibility to prove that species like elephants are much more valuable alive than dead. The ivory trade is still a threat. When a resource is scarce, it becomes more coveted. Laws will tighten, and eventually private collections of ivory will make their way into the hands of authorities. It's simply a matter of time. Hopefully elephants will survive long enough to bounce back.

© Ariadne van Zandbergen; FLPA

Watch dolphins at sea

Found across the world, these intelligent mammals leap from the sea, soar through the air and explore the vast open oceans around them

Words **Amy Grisdale**



Travel expert

Anna Bunney is the education coordinator at ORCA, a whale and dolphin charity in Portsmouth, UK

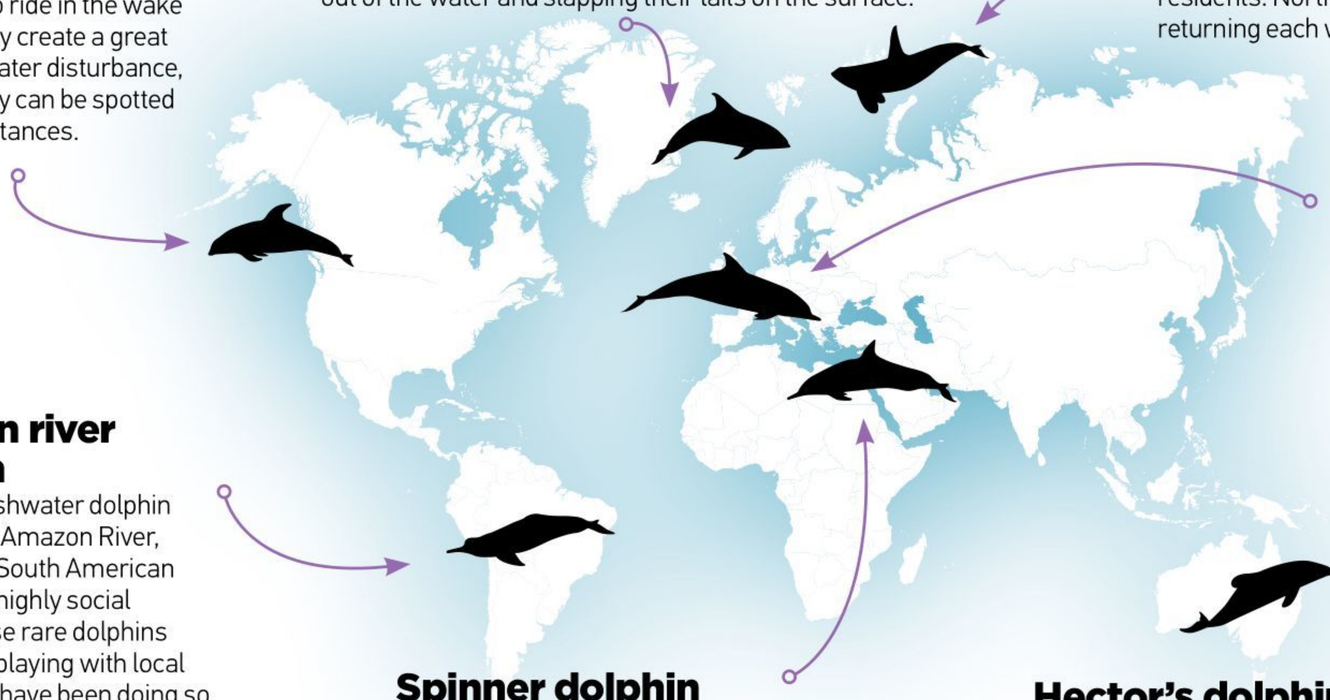
"Watching dolphins in the wild is an unforgettable wildlife encounter. Their energetic and acrobatic antics are certain to make you smile when you see them. Making the effort to appreciate them in their natural environment creates memories that will last a lifetime, and ensures that they are living safe and happy lives in the wild.

Dolphins are found in all of the world's oceans, so wherever you live you won't need to travel too far to see these wonderful marine mammals. The UK is home to bottlenose dolphins, white-beaked dolphins, common dolphins and even the largest species of dolphin – the killer whale. Wildlife enthusiasts can also visit one of the best places in the world to see whales and dolphins by hopping on a ferry from England to Spain and crossing the Bay of Biscay."

Pacific white-sided dolphin
Found in groups of 2,000 or more, these agile dolphins are known to ride in the wake of boats. They create a great amount of water disturbance, meaning they can be spotted over long distances.

White-beaked dolphin
Travelling in small pods, this cold-water species can be seen in the North Atlantic. Far from being shy, they are often found interacting with boats, leaping clean out of the water and slapping their tails on the surface.

Orca
The ocean's greatest hunter can be difficult to find in the wild due to its transient nature, but some pods stay around the same place as residents. Northern Norway sees orca pods returning each winter to feed on herring.

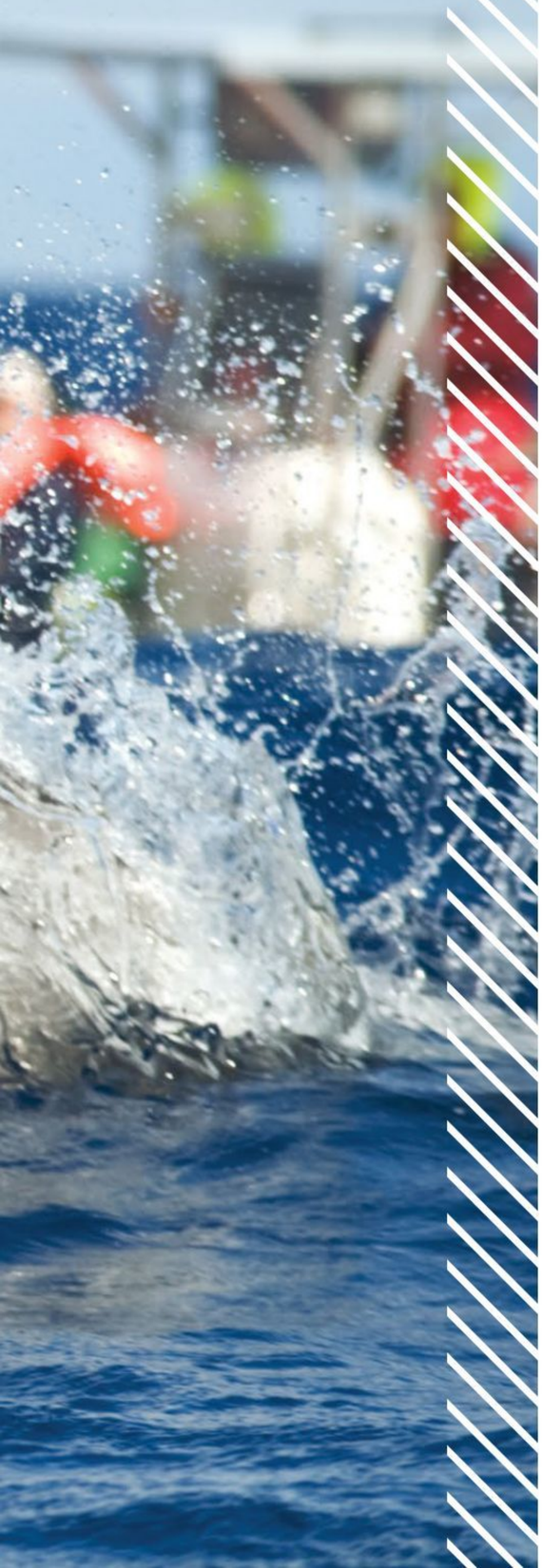


Striped dolphin
Preferring the deep, open ocean, these animals are superb acrobats and easily recognisable thanks to their beautiful colouration and tendency to somersault through the sea.

Amazon river dolphin
This pink freshwater dolphin explores the Amazon River, covering six South American countries. A highly social species, these rare dolphins can be seen playing with local children and have been doing so for decades.

Spinner dolphin
The long beak helps this dolphin to pierce the ocean surface to allow the animal to perform its spectacular aerial twirls. The Red Sea is among the many places spinner dolphins are found.

Hector's dolphin
One of the world's smallest and rarest dolphins, this species is only found off the coast of New Zealand. They are in decline, so those wishing to see them should do so sooner rather than later.





Travel guide

When to go
There is no specific time of year that they are more active, but often the summer months are better for dolphin watching.

How to get there
Coastal species can often be seen from land, but a boat ride will get you closer to the animals in their native habitat.

The weather
Dolphins tend to spend more time at the surface when there's no rain to get inside their blowholes as they come up for air.

What to take
A sun hat, sun block and polarised glasses are a good idea. Binoculars may help you to spot the dolphins from afar.

What you'll see
Dolphins are rarely alone, and depending on where you are, you may also see sharks, turtles, seals and seabirds on the same trip.

© NaturePL; Wild Wonders of Europe / Lundgren; freevectormaps.com; Karen van der Zijden / Alamy

Look a boto in the eye

Despite having two rows of razor-sharp teeth, Amazon river dolphins are gentle creatures. The water in which they live may be murky, but the animals have excellent eyesight. Visitors to the river report feeling a connection with the dolphins, which reportedly make eye contact with swimmers. Botos, as they are called in South America, are even known to rub themselves against swimmers and chase thrown sticks, but they have proven to be unsuitable for captive life.

Once thought to be solitary, these dolphins are actually very sociable and will exchange high-pitched click sounds. Mothers and their calves are inseparable, and the species sometimes socialises with other animals in brackish water, like giant otters.

Though not endangered, they are under threat. Going to watch them in the wild is a good way of discouraging poachers using dolphin meat as bait. These animals are more valuable alive, and tourism is booming in the Amazon.



Brazil



Watch striped dolphins put on a show

This is a species that's hard to see from the beach. They are deep-water inhabitants that usually swim in the open ocean, so it's best to take a boat trip to watch them in action. Striped dolphins swim in pods that reach thousands in number, and they're not the only ones at the party. Groups of these animals join with short-beaked common dolphins in the wild, and evidence suggests the two species interbreed. The two varieties can be hard to distinguish at a distance, but there are a few telltale differences. Common dolphins have yellow-patched flanks, and a dorsal fin that is lighter in colour in the centre. Striped dolphin dorsal fins are a uniform grey.

The best place to find these dolphins is over the continental shelf edge. This is where the seabed slopes downward rapidly, creating a dramatic undersea cliff. As ocean waters from the open sea hit this shelf, nutrients are forced up into the light-filled top section of the water. This creates a plankton bloom that attracts marine creatures like jellyfish, squid and giant tuna. Dolphins cannot resist this all-you-can-eat buffet, and the area is usually a hotbed of animal activity.

Dolphin behaviour explained



Porpoising

This behaviour involves a dolphin alternating between being underwater and flying through the air. The dolphin leaves and enters the water headfirst, which helps the animal move quickly without constantly battling water resistance.



Spy-hopping

Dolphins sometimes pop up vertically headfirst out of the water before then bobbing back down again. This behaviour gives the dolphin a good look around at what's going on, and the animal may even do this to get a better look at the humans watching it.



Breaching

This entails leaving the water completely and landing with a splash. This behaviour may help scratch an itch, dislodge parasites or accelerate a dolphin's natural skin exfoliation. On the other hand, maybe it's just brilliant fun. Nobody knows for sure.



Bow riding

Dolphins seem to enjoy swimming in the pressure wave created by a moving vessel. This disturbed water may be easier for the dolphins to travel through, therefore reducing the amount of effort that is required for them to move forwards.



Tail slapping

As the name suggests, this behaviour involves a dolphin beating its tail on the water's surface. This could have a communicative purpose, but some dolphin species use this method to stun nearby fish to make them easier to catch.

© Getty; Sylvain Cordier; LoPeix; Hiroya Minakuchi/Minden Pictures/FLPA; Kamadie

Experience an orca hunt

Scientifically proven to be the most successful hunter on the planet (alongside the dragonfly of all animals), an orca feeding frenzy is not to be missed. Killer whales catch 95% of the prey they set out to get. To put that in context, a single lion has a success rate of less than 20%. Because this species thrives in almost all of the world's oceans, groups have arisen that specialise in different things.

New Zealand orcas hunt stingrays, using their echolocation to find the flat fish buried in the sand, while Norway's killer whales are herring connoisseurs, charging into fjords in the winter when the fish are at the height of their numbers.

The largest orca subspecies are transients. This variety travels around the world in search of mammal meat and pops up wherever it can find food. Even resident orca move around, following the movements of fish shoals. This can make them a tricky animal to spot.



Norway

Watch Hector's dolphin (while you still can)

The second smallest dolphin (a subspecies of the Hector dolphin called the Maui is officially the smallest) in the sea is disappearing rapidly – there may be as few as 5,000 remaining around the coast of its native New Zealand.

A playful species, they appear to enjoy dragging around strings of seaweed (dolphins steal one another's sea vegetation as part of some sort of species-wide game). These animals are thought of as friendly and they will approach boats.

There is a downside to being so curious though. As a coastal species, Hector's dolphins often become entangled in fishing gear, sadly drowning as a result. However, researchers are working hard on technology that could repel marine mammals from fishing nets.



New Zealand

See spinner dolphins spiral

The motivation behind this animal's namesake trick is still a mystery. Some researchers believe it to be a method of emotional expression. Others think it's a way of attracting mates, with the largest and most powerful spinners being the most desirable. It is certain that the rapid rotation helps rid the skin of stowaways like remoras, but that may not be its primary purpose. The gravity-defying whirling could help with digestion, expel water from the blowhole or even regulate the dolphin's body temperature. Whatever drives the impulse, there's no denying it is a glorious act to witness in the wild.

Sightings of these spectacular animals can be fleeting. This species is always on the move and can even hide out in underwater 'rest areas' during the day. Some lucky dolphin watchers get to see two species for the price of one, as spinners sometimes team up with robust spotted dolphins for protection.



What to look for

Distant splashes
Dolphins create a lot of disturbance when coming up for air, so look out for patches of white water.

Bird activity
Diving or circling birds may be attempting to steal scraps of fish from dolphins. It's always worth giving it a second look.

Dark shapes
It could be floating debris, or it might just be slow-moving dolphins. Keep an eye out for the sun reflecting off their wet skin.

Egypt

Unfamiliar faces

Meet the bizarre dolphin species that you can come across in the wild



Southern right whale dolphin
The odd colouring, short snout and lack of a dorsal fin make this a striking creature. It inhabits deep subtropical and subantarctic waters, where it is seen very infrequently.



Hourglass dolphin
Vocalisations of this dolphin have never been recorded, and their polar distribution and high-speed swimming make them a hard species to study.



Risso's dolphin
Though they are born charcoal grey, these dolphins turn white with age as a result of being scarred by one another's teeth.



False killer whale
The fourth largest dolphin has a vast range but is rarely spotted. Stray individuals sometimes wander into temperate seas, but they soon return to the open ocean.



Australian humpback dolphin
Favouring shallow water, these strange toothed whales are known to 'strand feed'. This entails the dolphins launching themselves onto land in an attempt to catch any fish trying to escape their jaws.

© Getty; Federico Bonifazi / EyeEm; Tobias Bernhard/Biosphoto; Malcolm Schuyl; Photononstop / Alamy; FLPA; Debra McGuire; JordiStock; PeakMystique

Be surrounded by Pacific white-sided dolphins

Known to come inshore during winter, these dolphins congregate in groups of thousands. They are common throughout the northern half of the Pacific Ocean, all the way from the western coast of the US to the East China Sea.

The animals hunt in teams of up to 20 and co-ordinate to decimate large schools of fish like anchovies and mackerel. This organisation helps the dolphins bond closely, and injured members of the pod are supervised by healthy dolphins around the clock.



Canada

Watch white-beaked dolphins battle the cold

Named after its light-coloured mouth, this robust animal swims below Arctic pack ice. Visitors to the north coast of Iceland are likely to see these dolphins in groups of up to 50. White-beaked dolphins in this region follow visiting humpback whales, feasting on their leftovers. This appears to annoy the whales, causing them to breach, tail slap or strike the sea with their giant flippers to repel the pesky scavengers.



Iceland

Dolphin-spotting golden rules

Travel responsibly
Loud motors disturb whales and dolphins, so opt for a quiet boat if possible. Take all your rubbish home with you, and don't try to touch the animals.

Identify the species
Have a guidebook handy, and snap photos if you're unsure what kind of dolphins are in front of you. It's much easier to compare the images than rely on your memory.

Swim with caution
Bear in mind that the ocean is the animals' home. If you choose to get in the water, be respectful and give them space.

Help other spotters
Point out your sighting to others around you. Dolphins are a treat for everyone, and the more eyes on the animals, the more exciting the encounter becomes.

Report rare sightings
If you see an unexpected species, let local wildlife authorities know. This is especially important for dolphins in decline.

Who to travel with

Eco-friendly
ORCA
ORCAWEB.ORG.UK
Whale & Dolphin Sea Safari
Voyage to the Bay of Biscay to spot Risso's dolphins, pilot whales, fin whales and others. From £215pp (~$275).

Tropical
Amazônia Expeditions
AMAZONIAEXPEDITIONSBRAZIL.COM
Amazon Route
Visit the stunning Amazon rainforest and look out for the local dolphins as you cruise the river. From ~£390pp (~$500).

Luxury
Kaikoura Helicopters
KAIKOURAHELICOPTERS.COM
Top 'n' Tail Whalewatch Flight
Take to the skies and watch for sperm whales and dolphins along the picturesque New Zealand coast below. From ~£300pp (~$385).

© Richard Herrmann/Minden Pictures/FLPA; Anthony Pierce / Alamy; Getty; Henrik Sorensen

Go on a bear hunt

To catch a glimpse of these majestic mammals, you'll have to venture to some of Earth's most remote places

Words **Adam Millward**

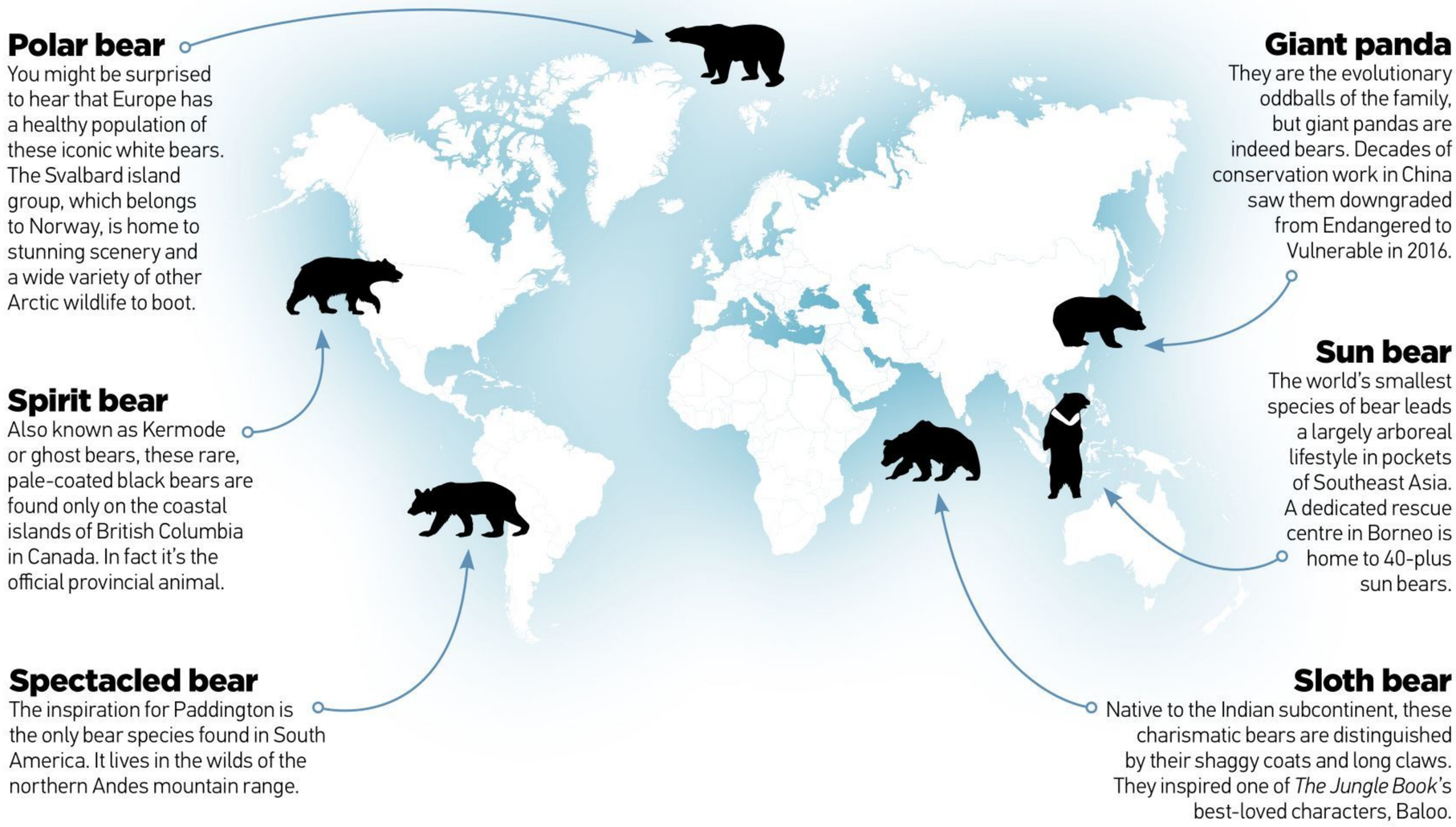


Travel expert

Chris Breen is the founder and managing director of Wildlife Worldwide, a travel operator that specialises in tailor-made wildlife-watching holidays

"There's something wonderful about watching bears – I get an adrenaline rush every time I see them out in the wild. Whether it's black bears, grizzlies or their polar cousins, in my opinion they are among the very best creatures to observe and photograph.

Canada's British Columbia is surely the top spot for black bears and grizzlies, although I have had amazing encounters in the Arctic north in Nunavut, where a bear's fur turns to ice as soon as it gets out of the water! As for polar bears, it has got to be either Churchill, staying at one of the remote tundra lodges, or aboard one of the vessels that we operate to Svalbard. For the real connoisseur, you might consider a visit to the icy north of Wrangel Island in Russia's Far East, where up to 500 polar bears are thought to be denning! For more information, visit **wildlifeworldwide.com**."



Polar bear
You might be surprised to hear that Europe has a healthy population of these iconic white bears. The Svalbard island group, which belongs to Norway, is home to stunning scenery and a wide variety of other Arctic wildlife to boot.

Spirit bear
Also known as Kermode or ghost bears, these rare, pale-coated black bears are found only on the coastal islands of British Columbia in Canada. In fact it's the official provincial animal.

Spectacled bear
The inspiration for Paddington is the only bear species found in South America. It lives in the wilds of the northern Andes mountain range.

Giant panda
They are the evolutionary oddballs of the family, but giant pandas are indeed bears. Decades of conservation work in China saw them downgraded from Endangered to Vulnerable in 2016.

Sun bear
The world's smallest species of bear leads a largely arboreal lifestyle in pockets of Southeast Asia. A dedicated rescue centre in Borneo is home to 40-plus sun bears.

Sloth bear
Native to the Indian subcontinent, these charismatic bears are distinguished by their shaggy coats and long claws. They inspired one of *The Jungle Book*'s best-loved characters, Baloo.



© Thinkstock; freevectormaps.com; Nature Picture Library/Alamy

Travel guide

When to go
Most bears in colder climes are dormant in winter, so are best seen in spring or summer. Those from temperate regions can be seen all year.

How to get there
Polar bears can be viewed from the water, air or tundra buggies, while other species will require a hike.

The weather
You're most likely to view bears in the summer months. If heading to the tropics, prepare for heavy rain and high humidity.

What to take
For polar trips you'll need a waterproof jacket, gloves and sunglasses. In bear country, take bug repellent and a kit to bear-proof your camp.

What you'll see
One thing that all bears share in common is a fondness for real wilderness. On a bear-watching holiday you'll get away from it all.

Seek out the king of the Arctic

Polar bears rank among the most popular animals on Earth, so it's little wonder that there is a well-established tourism industry built up around them. Although Canada boasts by far the largest population – including the world-famous 'polar bear capital', Churchill – Europe too has its own polar bear paradise: Svalbard.

This Norwegian archipelago, which straddles the Arctic Circle, is now estimated to be home to more polar bears than human inhabitants – 3,000 bears versus some 2,600 people. Given that these bears are most active on the sea ice, hunting for prey such as seals, the majority of tours are conducted by boat – the perfect way of navigating this fragmented and ever-changing landscape. Depending on how close you want to get to the planet's largest bears – they can weigh over 725 kilograms (1,600 pounds) and stand up to three metres (9.9 feet) tall on their hind legs – you can choose to view them from the deck of larger cruise ships, or get closer to the action on smaller inflatable craft.

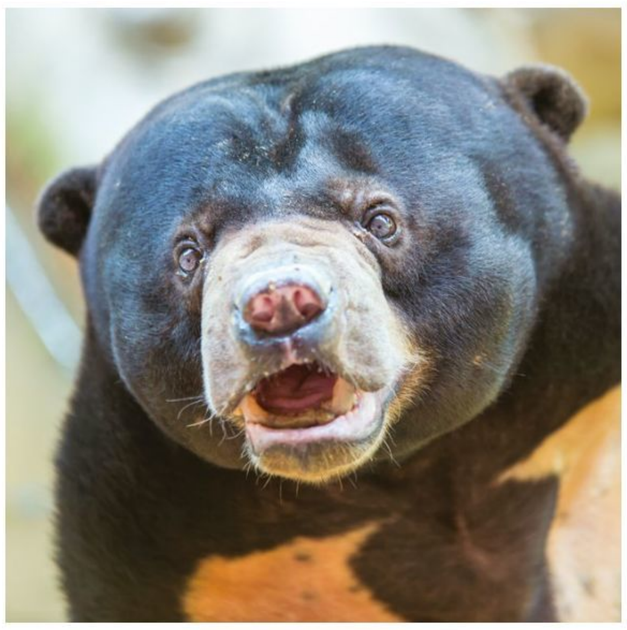
It's worth noting that if you're hoping to see the northern lights during your visit to Svalbard, the best displays occur in winter. However, this doesn't coincide with the optimum bear watching season of May to September.



Svalbard, Norway



Southeast Asia



Rise and shine with sun bears

From size and colour to temperament and habitat, sun bears are virtually the polar opposite of their giant, Arctic-dwelling cousins. This bijou bear, reaching no bigger than 1.5 metres (4.9 feet) long, is native to the tropical forests of Southeast Asia.

In the wild they can be extremely elusive; this is largely because they spend a lot of their time in the dense jungle canopy, resting or hunting out bugs and lizards. However, their favourite snack by far is honey. Its passion for the sweet stuff, which easily rivals that of the famous Winnie the Pooh, has earned it the nickname of the 'honey bear'.

The best place to see these bears up close is at the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre in Sabah. Open to the public since 2014, the sanctuary features large forest enclosures, encouraging the rehabilitation of wild bears that have been rescued from captivity. To do your bit for conservation, and get to know the bears more closely, you can volunteer to assist with daily tasks at the centre, including feeding, cleaning and giving tours.

Top five safety tips



Keep your distance

It sounds obvious, but in the excitement of the moment, it's tempting to get closer to take a photo. Respect a bear's space, especially if it's a mother with cubs.



Never walk alone

If trekking through areas where bears are known to be active, always try to stay in small groups or at the very least in pairs. You also need to pay close attention to your surroundings.



Keep a tidy camp

To avoid attracting bears, keep the kitchen area at a distance from your tent, and consider storing food in a sealed bag hung from a tree.



Noise matters

When watching bears, keep noise to a minimum, but if you spot a bear approaching, a few blasts of an air horn should deter it.



Bear spray

For unexpected encounters, it pays to have a canister of bear spray close to hand. It's effective as far as 12 metres (40 feet).

© Dreamstime; Thinkstock; Jami Tarris/Minden Pictures/FLPA



Go on a ghost hunt

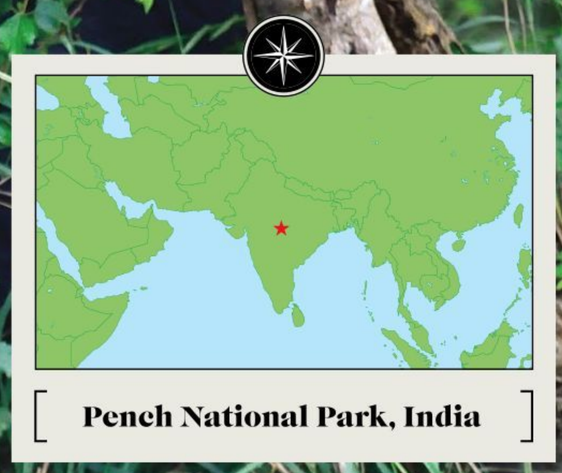
Polar bears aren't the only all-white members of the family. The enigmatic Kermode bear is a rare subspecies of black bear native to the lush Pacific coast of British Columbia in Canada. They go by many names, including spirit bears and ghost bears, and they are held in high esteem by locals, especially First Nations people. Their unusual colouration is not the result of albinism but a recessive gene, which both parents must have for there to be a chance of producing pale offspring; as the trait is recessive, both parents can have black fur and still produce a white cub.

Notoriously timid, these bears spend most of their lives hidden among the ancient trees and ferny dells of the world's largest temperate rainforest. However, they do break cover for a few weeks every year. They emerge to gorge on the ready supply of salmon that arrives every September to spawn in the shallow coastal creeks, so this is the best time to see them.

Explore the real Jungle Book

The lazy, if well-intentioned character, Baloo does something of a disservice to sloth bears. Likewise does their association with the slow and cumbersome tree sloths of South America. In reality, these charismatic creatures are anything but lazy or slow! The only reason they got their name is because their unusual teeth and long claws – both of which are adaptations for their diet of ants and termites – are reminiscent of sloths, despite there being no biological link.

To see what these bears are really like, what better place to head to than the area that inspired Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*? Pench National Park, located in the heart of India, comprises vast grasslands, hills and rocky bluffs, and various types of forest. This diverse landscape makes it perfect not just for sloth bears but also a wide array of other large mammals, including tigers, wild dogs, jaguars and wolves. Unlike their cold-climate relatives, sloth bears can be seen year-round, though you might have to pull a few late nights as these bears are mostly nocturnal.





See the comeback kids

In the world of wildlife conservation, it's not very often we get to celebrate turnarounds as positive as the giant panda's. But while the IUCN's downgrading of the species from Endangered to Vulnerable is no doubt a huge achievement, there's no room for complacency.

In early 2017, China announced plans to create a vast national park – three times the size of Yellowstone in the US – to link up several existing pockets of wild pandas and boost their long-term viability. It can only be hoped that this positive trend will be able to continue.

While understandably most people would prefer to see pandas in the wild, the fact remains that, for now, your chances of finding one – even with a guide – are very low. To avoid a disappointing trip, you should set aside time to visit one of the conservation centres in Sichuan, such as Chengdu Panda Base. Here, in what is generally considered the 'panda capital of the world', you can learn about the decades of breeding and rehabilitation work – still ongoing – that has turned around the panda's fortunes. Better still, sightings of the bears here are guaranteed.

Top five bear facts



The bear that isn't

Despite their resemblance and often being referred to as 'bears', koalas are not part of the bear family. As marsupials, they're more closely related to wombats.



Bears don't technically hibernate

While a number of bears do disappear into dens to escape the winter, scientists don't believe that they hibernate, strictly speaking. Instead, they become dormant to conserve energy, entering a state known as torpor.



They have good eyesight

A common misconception about bears is that their vision is poor. In reality their eyesight is as good as ours, and they are particularly adept at seeing in low light.



You should never run away

Bears are fast – at full pelt, a grizzly can hit 56 kilometres (35 miles) per hour. If charged at, hold your ground, make lots of noise and prepare to defend yourself.



Pandas are meat-eaters at heart

Pandas may dine almost exclusively on bamboo, but millions of years ago they were voracious carnivores. Even now, they will eat the occasional rodent.

© Thinkstock; Erik Veland; Dreamstime

Meet South America's only bear

Everyone's favourite bear from Peru, Paddington, is based on the spectacled bear. This shy species lives in the cloud forests of the Andes, including Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and, of course, Peru. You'll frequently find them in a tree, feasting on leaves, fruit and nuts; their diet is almost 95% vegetarian. Although they don't retire in the winter like their northern relations, it's worth noting that spectacled bears are more active during mating season (April to June). However, if you're keen to see some baby Paddingtons, you're better off going later in the year (November to February).



Track brown bears

Canada is famous for its grizzlies, but Europe has its own brown bear population, dispersed from Spain all the way to Russia. The Carpathian Mountains are home to some 8,000, with Romania claiming the lion's share. This country has hundreds of hides in its vast forests, where you can watch from safety and with a degree of shelter – this region is notorious for its temperamental weather! Brown bears share their woodland territory with many other species, including beavers, wolves, lynx, bison and deer.



The bear necessities

Bug repellent can be bear repellent
Bear-watching hides will often bring you into contact with lots of nasty biting insects. Be wary of overdoing it with the mosquito spray, though, as bears' acute sense of smell may detect this in the wind and deter them from approaching.

Look out for the signs
Bears are notoriously good at hiding, but there are several telltale clues that indicate when they are in the vicinity. Tracks are the most obvious clue, left behind in snow, sand or soft mud. Other signs include scratched tree trunks, scat and areas of freshly dug earth.

Don't be bear blinkered
Bears live in some of the most beautiful wildernesses on the planet, from frozen icescapes and alpine forests to tropical jungles. Even if the bears aren't making an appearance, don't forget to appreciate the surroundings and the other local fauna.

© Thinkstock

Who to travel with

Conservation
Sun Bear Centre
BSBCC.ORG.MY

14-day volunteer programme
Volunteer for two weeks helping to take care of and rehabilitate sun bears at a conservation centre in Sepilok, Borneo. From ~£920pp (~$1,180).

Polar cruise
Hurtigruten
HURTIGRUTEN.CO.UK

Spitsbergen and Polar Bears: An Arctic Adventure
Spend six days aboard the MS Nordstjernen exploring the wilderness of Svalbard, home of the world's largest bears. Tours run from May to September. From £1,254pp (~$1,610).

Wilderness escape
Wildlife Worldwide
WILDLIFEWORLDWIDE.COM

The Bear Essentials
Enjoy a week in British Columbia, Canada, where there's the chance to see grizzlies, black bears and even the elusive ghost bears. From £3,445pp (~$4,420).

Turtle watch

There are few animals more majestic than sea turtles, and these ocean wanderers can be spotted on beaches all over the world

Words **Laura Mears**

Travel expert

Brad Nahill is president and co-founder of SEE Turtles, a non-profit that specialises in sea turtle conservation tours and education

"Sea turtles are fun and beautiful, nesting is predictable, they aren't dangerous, and if precautions are taken, you can watch their nesting without disturbing them.

When a sea turtle is nesting, it goes into a trance where it blocks everything out. That is when researchers and travellers can approach and watch the eggs drop into the nest. We suggest doing this with a local researcher or guide who can explain the process and make sure they're not being disturbed. Visiting turtle-nesting beaches can be immensely helpful for the animals and local communities. Fees for observing the turtles can go towards their conservation, and communities whose economies depend on the turtles being alive are more likely to protect them instead of eating their eggs or meat, or using their shells."



Leatherback
There are thousands of leatherbacks in the Atlantic, but Pacific leatherbacks are the most endangered turtles in the sea. There are thought to be fewer than 2,300 females left.

Green
Green turtles aren't actually green, but they are found across the world, from Asia to South America and Africa.

Kemp's ridley
Like flatback turtles, these turtles also have a very restricted range. They are only found in shallow waters in the Gulf of Mexico.

Hawksbill
These pointy-beaked turtles are found in tropical reefs the world over, where they feed on sponges, helping to keep the coral clean and healthy.

Olive ridley
This small species of sea turtle likes shallow water. They number in the hundreds of thousands, making them the most common sea turtle in the world.

Loggerhead
These turtles are commonly seen in the Mediterranean, where they make their nests along the coast from Greece to Israel.

Flatback
Unlike most other turtle species, these turtles have a very restricted range. They are only found off the coast of Australia.



© freevectormaps.com; Thinkstock

Travel guide

When to go
Turtles can be spotted all year round, but to see eggs hatching, the best time to go is in late summer.

How to see turtles
Turtles visit beaches across the globe from Europe to Australia, so hop on a train, boat or plane.

The weather
Turtles will often come out of the sea to bask on sunny days. They are not fans of choppy waters.

What to take
Wear non-reflective clothes and put a red filter over your torch so that you don't disturb the turtles at night.

How ecotourism can help
By paying to go on turtle-watching trips, you're helping to fund their conservation, as well as helping to provide locals with jobs.



See a green sea turtle

These turtles are found across the world, but some of their most important nesting areas are in Africa, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. They can also be seen in the US and South America. And, if you're very lucky, you can sometimes spot them around the south of England.

When nesting, the females come out of the sea and up onto the beach, where they walk beyond the line of the highest tide to find sand that will stay dry as their eggs get ready to hatch. This can take up to 70 days, so the precious eggs are sometimes collected by conservationists and taken to a safe place to incubate. These hatcheries sometimes take on volunteers to help look after the eggs and release the newly hatched turtles safely back onto the beach.

For the best chance of seeing a green sea turtle, head to Tortuguero on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast between June and October. This national park is named after the turtles that inhabit it. With miles of protected coastline, it's visited by green, hawksbill, loggerhead and leatherback turtles from February to October.



Africa, Southeast Asia, South Pacific, North America, South America, England

Top turtle-watching tips

Get a guide

A local expert can take you to the right spot, explain what's going on, and make sure that the turtles are safe.

Go red

Turtles don't want to be disturbed, so turn the flash off on your camera and use a red filter on your torch to minimise the light.

Stay quiet

Move slowly and keep a constant lookout for turtles around you. Talk at a whisper, and give the turtles plenty of space.

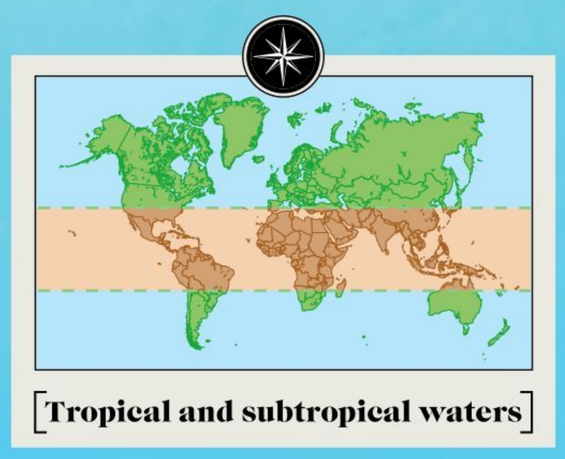
Be patient

Sea turtles are endangered, so you might not always get to see one. The priority is always their safety and wellbeing, so be prepared to stand back to accommodate them.

Don't help

If you see turtles on their way to the sea, don't try to help them. Watch from a distance as they make their way to the water.

© Dreamstime; Thinkstock; Jami Tarris/Minden Pictures/FLPA



Swim with hawksbills

The hawksbill turtle is easily recognised by its bird-like beak, and if you're diving in coral you might just be lucky enough to see one. They are found in tropical and subtropical waters across the world, including the Caribbean Sea, around Australia, near the Galápagos and in Malaysia and Indonesia.

They like clear, shallow water, making them ideal swimming partners for lucky divers, and many dive centres get involved in tracking turtle sightings to help with conservation research.

They're easy to spot thanks to their beautifully patterned shells. Made from overlapping scales known as scutes, in shades of orange, brown and amber, the hawksbill shell is both a blessing and a curse. While it makes these animals stunning to look at, it also makes for 'tortoiseshell' souvenirs, a practice that has contributed to the decline of these amazing animals.

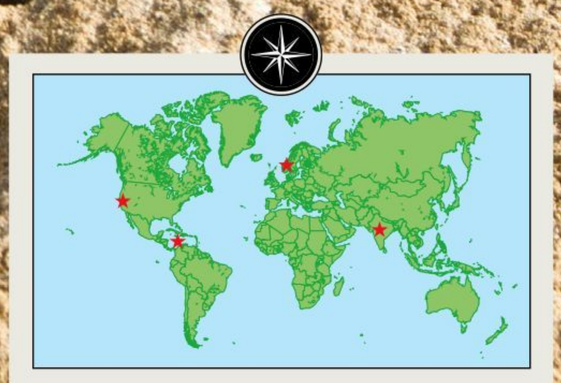
Find them nesting in Costa Rica's Cahuita National Park in September and October, or head to the Seychelles for a chance to spot them in the water.

Discover the strangest sea turtle

Leatherback turtles are the largest and weirdest species of sea turtle. Turtles were around when the dinosaurs roamed the Earth, and many species survived the mass extinction event, but leatherbacks are the only members of their family still around today.

They are found across the world, from the chilly waters of Norway to the jellyfish-rich beaches of California and the tropical sands of India. They're easy to recognise because they're the only sea turtles without a solid, bony shell. Instead, they have oily, leathery armour made from much more flexible connective tissue.

They have long flippers and can dive deeper than any other turtle species at around 1,280 metres (4,200 feet). They spend most of their time out at sea, but if you want to meet these strange animals, you can see them nesting in the Caribbean from March to July.



Norway, California, India, Caribbean

Protect loggerheads from plastic waste

If you're heading to the United States or the Mediterranean, the loggerhead turtle is the one you're most likely to encounter. Go to Florida between May and September, or Kefalonia in Greece between May and August for the best chance to see them nesting.

If you do go looking for them, be sure to do it responsibly. These shy animals rely on their beaches to mate and to lay their eggs, and they can be startled by noise and movement, distracted by lights and confused by plastic and other waste. These turtles eat jellyfish, and to them a plastic bag looks like a tasty treat. If they eat one they can't digest it, and if they eat several they can fill up on rubbish and even starve to death. You can help them out by clearing any rubbish that you see.



North America, Greece



See Australia's unique turtle

Unlike most other sea turtle species, flatback turtles have decided to make their home in one specific part of the globe. If you want to see one, you'll have to venture all the way to Australia.

This species has a distinctive smooth shell, which provides a handy perch for tired seabirds when the turtles come to the surface of the water. They eat soft foods like sea cucumbers, prawns, molluscs and jellyfish, and they are most often found in the shallows near the coast.

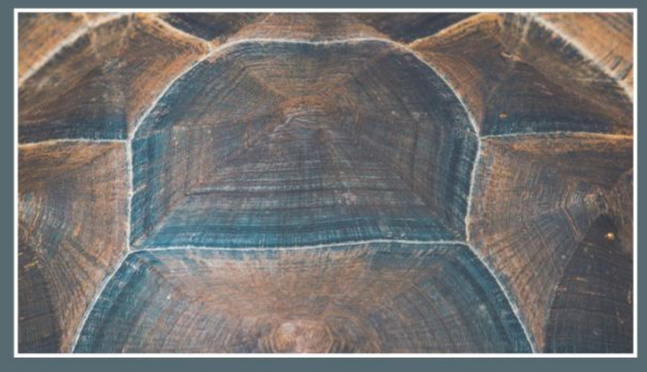
The largest population is found on Crab Island, where nesting season begins in September each year, but watch out for predators if you're visiting. Australia is home to the fearsome saltwater crocodile, which can reach over five metres (16 feet) in length. With their enormous jaws and skewer-like teeth, even an armoured shell doesn't provide enough protection. Luckily, conservationists are on hand to support local turtle populations.

Top five ecotourism tips



Pick up plastic

There is now more plastic in the sea than plankton. Sea turtles can mistake rubbish for food, filling up on waste that can potentially kill them.



Avoid turtleshell

Hawksbill turtles are harvested for their beautiful shells, which are used to create jewellery and trinkets. Avoid souvenirs that are brown, orange and amber in colour with irregular shapes and markings.



Eat local

Supporting the local economy by eating sustainable food is a great way to contribute to sea turtle conservation. Try hook- and line-caught seafood.



Stay back

Visiting turtles is a good way to increase awareness and money spent on turtle conservation, but remember to respect the animals and keep your distance.



Volunteer

There are many tours and trips aimed at turtle conservation where you can work with researchers. Look for trips that help fund more conservation work.

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North America

Find America's rarest sea turtle

To catch a sight of a Kemp's ridley turtle you'll need to travel to the east coast of North America; they're not found anywhere else. They are the smallest of the sea turtle species, and they have a strange habit that makes them well worth watching out for. Between May and July, hundreds of females appear on the beaches to lay their eggs all at once in an event called arribada ('arrival' in Spanish). If you're lucky, you might be able to find them at Rancho Nuevo in Mexico.



Nicaragua

See hundreds of heart-shaped turtles

Olive ridley turtles are close relatives of the Kemp's ridley, but unlike their cousins, they have spread across the oceans. One of the best places to find them is La Flor beach in Nicaragua. Like their cousins, they descend upon beaches in their thousands to lay their eggs in coordinated nesting events. For a chance to see this astonishing spectacle, visit between July and November. You might also see leatherback, hawksbill and green sea turtles while you're there.

See turtles in the UK

Several years ago, The Deep aquarium in Hull added two loggerhead sea turtles to its 2.4-million-litre Endless Ocean exhibit. Named Sensa and Mabouche, the pair were rescued from the Mediterranean after being caught on fishermen's long lines, which damaged their lower jaws. Even after rehabilitation, they couldn't be released into the wild as they can't catch their own food, so have a new forever home in Hull.

THE DEEP
For conservation, not profit.

Top tips for seeing sea turtles

Look under water
Hawksbill sea turtles love coral reefs, so if you're diving keep an eye out for these majestic swimmers in their natural habitat.

Find a hatchling release
Eggs are often moved to a safe place by conservationists so that they can hatch in peace. They are released at night and sometimes the public are invited to watch.

By the beach
Sea turtles are cold-blooded and occasionally come out onto the beach to warm up in the sun. If you're lucky, you might see them sunbathing on the sand.

© The Deep; Thinkstock; Alamy/adrian hepworth; Michael Patrick O'Neill

Who to travel with

Budget
Frontier
FRONTIER.AC.UK

Greece Turtle Conservation
Help protect loggerhead sea turtles at a nesting site in Kefalonia. From £599pp (~$770).

Family
TUI
GOTUI.CO.UK

Riviera Maya Snorkel with Turtles, Mexico
Snorkel in the Mexican jungle, and swim with sea turtles along the Caribbean reef in this half-day tour. From £77pp (~$100).

Luxury
Rainbow Tours
RAINBOWTOURS.CO.UK

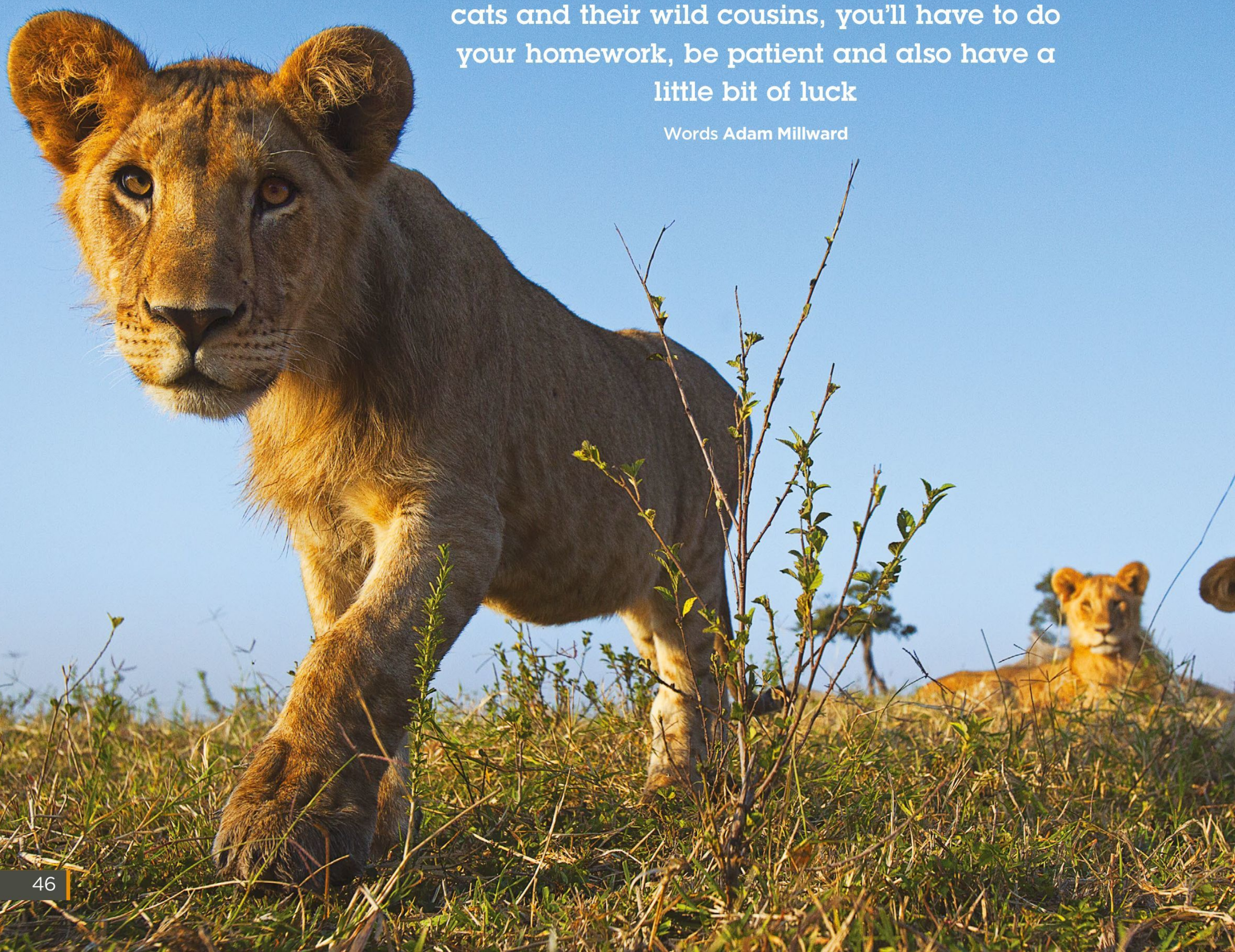
Costa Rica Highlights
This 12-day tour includes a visit to Tortuguero's turtle nesting beach. From £2,645pp (~$3,400), including flights.



Tread on wild cat territory

For a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with big cats and their wild cousins, you'll have to do your homework, be patient and also have a little bit of luck

Words **Adam Millward**



Travel expert

Tom Mabbett is the big cat specialist at Naturetrek, which offers a range of wildlife tours all over the world tailored to viewing wild felines – both large and small

"Finding wild cats in their natural habitat is a great challenge, and the 36 to 42 species (depending on taxonomy) are found right across the globe. Being notoriously elusive, any sighting is a wonderful, thrilling moment and truly cherished by the observer.

Techniques for finding these cats vary from methodically scanning vast mountainsides for snow leopards or Pallas' cats to spotlighting through the night for clouded leopards or Eurasian lynxes or taking a jeep safari following tracks and alarm calls for tigers or leopards. All are exciting, and my favourite is cruising the rivers of the Pantanal in Brazil in search of jaguars. This powerhouse stalks along the banks, and slowly covering ground checking any openings often yields success! Visit **naturetrek.co.uk** for more."



Scottish wildcat
If you live in the UK, you don't have to get on a plane to see cats in the wild – the UK boasts its own mini 'tiger' living in remote pockets of the Scottish Highlands.

Tiger
Photograph the real-life Shere Khan in central India – the best place to see wild tigers in the world.

Iberian lynx
This Spanish/Portuguese native is starting to make a comeback, but it's still a challenge to find the most endangered cat. At least there's lots of other wildlife to enjoy while you wait!

Snow leopard
Really get away from it all for a chance to see perhaps the world's most elusive cats in Mongolia's Altai Mountains.

Jaguar
Brazil's Pantanal is home to caiman, capybara, howler monkeys and more, but you'll need to keep your eyes peeled to spot South America's largest cats.

Lion
Enjoy a live performance of Big Cat Diary, hopefully with cameos by the 'Big 3' (lions, cheetahs and jaguars), as well as some of their smaller relations.



© freevectormaps.com; NaturePL/ Anup Shah; Getty; Thinkstock; demarfa

Travel guide

When to go
Aim for migration periods, or the dry/warm season as this draws cats to watering holes, narrowing their range.

How to get there
For grassland species like cheetahs and lions, a jeep is best. Rainforest and wetland cats are best viewed from a canoe/kayak.

The weather
Whether you're hiking, paddling in a boat or riding in an open-top vehicle, warm, dry weather is ideal for comfort and photos.

What to take
Most wild cats live in tropical climes, so take light, breathable clothes, plus plenty of sun cream and bug spray.

What you'll see
Wild cats often preside over areas that offer lots of hiding places, so while that first sighting may take time, be sure to appreciate the other fauna and flora.

Take a jaguar cruise

The jaguar's range extends from Mexico, through Central America and the Amazon, right down to Argentina, but no area offers better odds of seeing these graceful cats than the world's largest wetland, the Pantanal. This swampy region, located predominantly in western Brazil but also spilling over into Bolivia and Paraguay, is, without question, your best opportunity to spot Latin America's biggest felines in the wild.

The reason that sightings are more common here than anywhere else is all down to the terrain. Whereas foliage in rainforest areas like the Amazon and Central America is thick year-round, making it hard to see these well-camouflaged cats even when they're close by, in the Pantanal visibility works much more in our favour. It isn't the easiest place to reach, so you may as well stay in one of the fazendas (ranches) or riverside lodges for a few days (Pantanal Jungle Lodge (**pantanal-jungle-lodge.com**) is a great one).

As you explore the waterways by boat (both motor-powered and kayak), you're likely to see jaguars strolling along the river, lounging in a patch of sunlight or even swimming from one bank to another. What's more, much of their prey – such as caiman and capybara – live in and around the water, so if you're lucky you might even see these apex predators in deadly action!



Mexico, Central America, South America



India



Earn your stripes on a tiger safari

India is now home to nearly 3,000 tigers, a third more than it had in 2015, according to the latest tiger census, which suggests there's never been a better time to see these iconic cats in their natural habitat.

Despite rising numbers (India is home to more than half the global population), Bengal tigers don't make it easy for us to find them. To give yourself the best shot, visit two or three different reserves during your trip. The state of Madhya Pradesh in the heart of India offers some of the highest concentrations of tigers, with top spots in close proximity, including Bandhavgarh National Park, Kanha Tiger Reserve and Pench National Park (the latter was the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*).

The general consensus regarding the best season to visit is during the summer months (April to June), when vegetation begins to die back and tigers are more likely to stick close to water. It's also at this time that tigresses give birth, so you may see mothers with their cubs.

India is also home to its very own species of lion. If you have time, consider a trip to Gujarat in the far west to visit the Asiatic lions of Gir National Park, the country's lesser-known cat.

How to track wild cats



Look

Tell-tale signs that indicate a wild cat has recently passed by include scat containing bits of bone and fur, paw marks left behind in soft earth (feline tracks usually have no claw imprints) and deep gouges in tree trunks, which are used as scratching posts.



Listen

Only the four true big cats – the tiger, lion, leopard and jaguar – can roar, and even they keep schtum if they know humans are nearby. Instead, listen out for the warning calls of other animals, such as deer, birds and monkeys, which could signal the presence of a cat.



Smell

Is there a whiff of rotting flesh in the air? It could very well be a recent victim of a cat attack hidden in undergrowth. If so, there's a good chance that the hunter is still in the vicinity – as could be other opportunistic cats – so be vigilant.



Ask

Nobody knows the movements of wild cats better than the people who live or work alongside them year-round. Check in with the nearest ranger's office to find out where the latest sightings have occurred. Better yet, hire a local guide to lead your search.

Think

As with finding any animal in the wild, you need to start thinking like the creature you're trying to seek. For instance, if it's a hot afternoon, a cat is most likely going to be near water or resting in a shady spot, so focus your search on these areas.

©Thinkstock; Getty; vencavolrab; NaturePL; Nick Garbutt

Visit an island overtaken by cats

Okay, so these felines are technically more feral than wild, but nevertheless, if you're a 'cat person' then you need to put Aoshima Island on your bucket list.

On this mile-long island off southern Japan, the cats have come to outnumber the human residents by as much as six to one! This bizarre turn of events came about due to a sharp decline in the fishing industry during the 20th century. Formerly employed as pest control, many of the working cats were left to their own devices as people moved away, and ever since the tabby population has soared.

Aoshima's four-legged inhabitants are particularly active around the main village's harbour, where they hang about ever hopeful for a fishy freebie from the remaining locals and an ever-increasing tide of tourists. The harbour is where the ferry arrives, a 35-minute trip from Port Nagahama costing 1,360 yen (~£10/$13) each way.



Japan

Track down the UK's most purr-fect predator

A wild cat living in the UK? Believe it or not, it's true. The 'Highland tiger' is a subspecies of European wildcat, and today this bona-fide Brit is the country's largest remaining wild carnivore. At a quick glance, they look pretty similar to a domestic moggy, but there are some key distinctions, including a stockier body, broad stripes in the fur and a much thicker tail patterned with black rings.

Extremely shy by nature and limited to just a handful of sites in and around Scotland's Grampian Mountains, you have to be realistic about your chances of a sighting, but there are some top tips. Normally, these cats are most active at low light during dawn and dusk, but in the winter they're more likely to be hunting in the day, so this is a good time to visit. Also, vegetation dies back at this time of year and snow on the ground makes spotting paw tracks far easier.

Whenever you go, be sure to schedule in a stop at the Highland Wildlife Park in the Cairngorms National Park to see these small-but-perfectly-formed predators up close.



Scotland



Lend a helping paw to Africa's cats in need

Africa is one of the world's top destinations for cat lovers, with no less than ten native felines. While the bigger members of the family often steal the limelight, the continent also harbours more obscure smaller species, such as the desert-dwelling sand cat and the African golden cat, which lives in central rainforests.

For those hoping to see iconic big cats on safari, it's worth doing your homework before you go, as species and behaviours differ not just from country to country but even between parks. For instance, Kenya's Maasai Mara – where the TV series *Big Cat Diary* is filmed – has more lions that anywhere else on the continent; South Luangwa National Park is a hot spot for leopards; while the planet's fastest mammals – cheetahs – have a high concentration in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park.

If you're looking to give something back to Africa's feline residents, there are ample opportunities to do your bit for cat conservation. Your contribution could be anything from making a donation or sponsoring a radio collar for charities like Africat in Namibia or visiting a wildlife sanctuary to learn about and promote their work. To get really hands on, you could volunteer at a project like South Africa's Felidae Centre (**felidaecentre.co.za**). Duties include feeding the cats, cleaning pens, guiding visitors and repairing enclosures.

Bob Poole: wildlife filmmaker



Bob Poole is an Emmy Award-winning wildlife filmmaker who's travelled across the world to capture nature's most amazing moments. His 2017 project for National Geographic, *Man Among Cheetahs*, saw him following female cheetah Naborr and her two young cubs.

How did the idea of* Man Among Cheetahs *come about?

I'd done a lot of things recently with National Geographic and they were looking for a show to put me in, and they wanted to do a film about cheetahs. I knew a very special place where I'd been filming where there was a mother cheetah with two cubs, and so the idea was to follow her 24/7 and just show the exciting rollercoaster life that she leads.

Did you learn anything while you were filming that surprised you?

I think the thing that I learned most was in this case just how precarious the life of a cheetah is. They're the underdogs, they're sharing the exact same habitat as lions, hyenas and leopards, all of whom would kill them, especially the cubs, but even the adults are constantly facing danger, and so they really live this crazy life.

Why do you think people have such a fascination with big cats?

Anything that can kill us fascinates us, and so that's one thing. I think we're mesmerised by the power of these big cats, their sheer capabilities. They're just extraordinary. The other thing is that they're such beautiful animals. The look in their eyes or the way they move – it's all so mesmerising. We know they're in trouble, and the thought of living in a world without big cats thriving in the wild I think is a really awful thought, so we care about them.

What can people do to make a difference?

There are pages where you can help on the National Geographic website through the Big Cat initiative. They're doing great stuff – funding research and anti-poaching and all kinds of things. And then of course I always tell people the best thing they can do is go to Africa. If you can do it, it's the best thing you can do, because it not only gives money directly to conservation through the parks and camps that help local people with their jobs, but it also sends an important message to governments that we care and it's worth conserving all this wildlife.

"Anything that can kill us fascinates us. I think we're mesmerised by the power of cats"

© Thinkstock; Getty; Maggy Meyer; NaturePL; Pete Cairns

Spot the missing lynx

With an estimated 400 Iberian lynx in the wild, this on-the-brink species is the planet's rarest cat. Although this is a marked improvement from the sub-100 population of 2002, there's still a lot of work to be done.

Intermittent reports of lynx come in from much of southern and central Spain and across the border into Portugal, but their greatest stronghold today is Andújar Natural Park (which abuts the Sierra de Cardeña y Montoro Natural Park) in the Sierra Morena mountain range.

Take a pair of binoculars and some snacks to tide you over, find a high patch of ground that overlooks open scrubland, then settle in to play the waiting game. While you wait, remember that lynx aren't the only endangered species residing in this hilly wilderness. Other animals to be on the lookout for are Iberian wolves, black storks and imperial eagles – Spain's national bird.



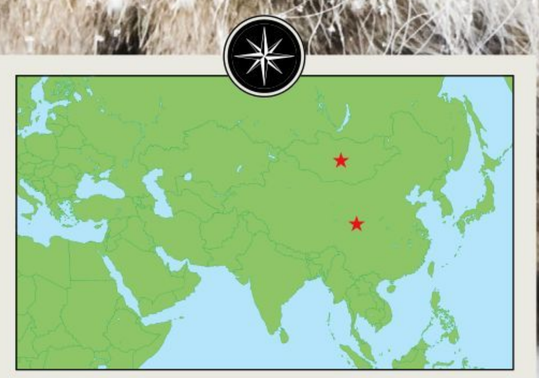
Spain, Portugal

Summon 'ghosts' in the Mongolian mountains

There's a good reason that snow leopards are known as the 'ghosts of the mountain' – they're extremely evasive creatures and their camouflage enables them to all but vanish into their natural surroundings. Mongolia is one of the best places to see these ethereal felines; for one thing, it hosts the second largest population in the world after China, and two, they venture to far lower, more easily accessible elevations here than their high-altitude kin in the Himalayas. Thanks to a new reserve established in 2016 in the Tost Mountains on the southern border – bridging two existing national parks – Mongolia also now boasts one of the largest snow leopard safe havens on the planet.

There are various ways to explore this epic wilderness, characterised by sheer ravines, steppe grassland and glacier-flanked peaks. Choose between 4x4 vehicles, horse treks or hiking on foot – or a combination of all three – and, if you can, camp out in order to maximise your time here.

Leopards aren't the only local felines: the furry manul (Pallas' cat) favours the rocky plains of these foothills, while Eurasian lynxes also pass through. Besides cats, there are several endemic mammals, from the huge-horned argali sheep and Siberian ibex to Przewalski horses (the last truly wild horses), which thrive in Hustai National Park.



China, Mongolia

Who to travel with

Staycation
Wild Highland Tours
WILDHIGHLANDTOURS.CO.UK

Night Time Tour
A four-hour nocturnal outing that uses thermal imagery to search for the 'Highland tiger', the Scottish wildcat as well as deer, owls, bats and more. £250pp (~$320).

Volunteering
GoEco
GOECO.ORG

South Africa – Wild Cat Sanctuary
Spend two weeks working at a rescue centre with lions, cheetahs, jaguars and caracals, as well as non-feline species like meerkats. From £910pp (~$1,170).

Luxury
Naturetrek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

Brazil – Just Jaguars!
Spend 12 days wildlife-spotting in the Pantanal, focusing on South America's largest cat. £4,495pp (~$5,770), including flights.

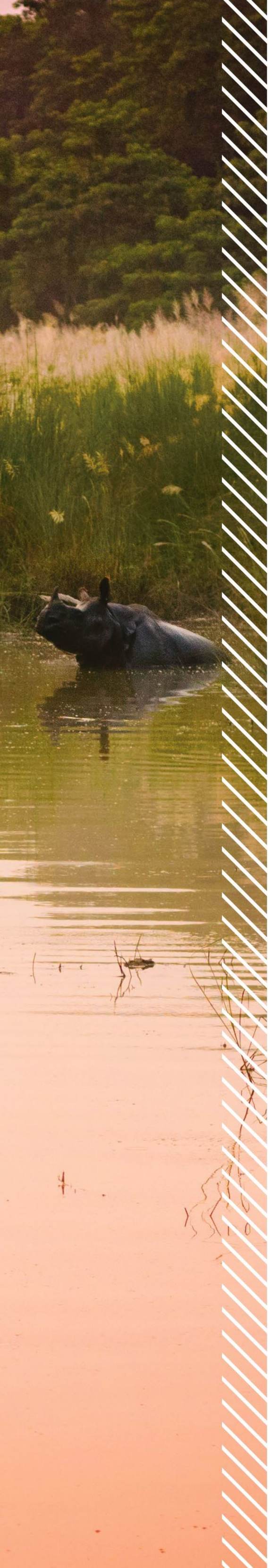
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Discover roaming rhinos

Set off on an expedition to meet some of the world's largest and most endangered animals in their natural habitat

Words **Laura Mears**





Rhinos in the wild

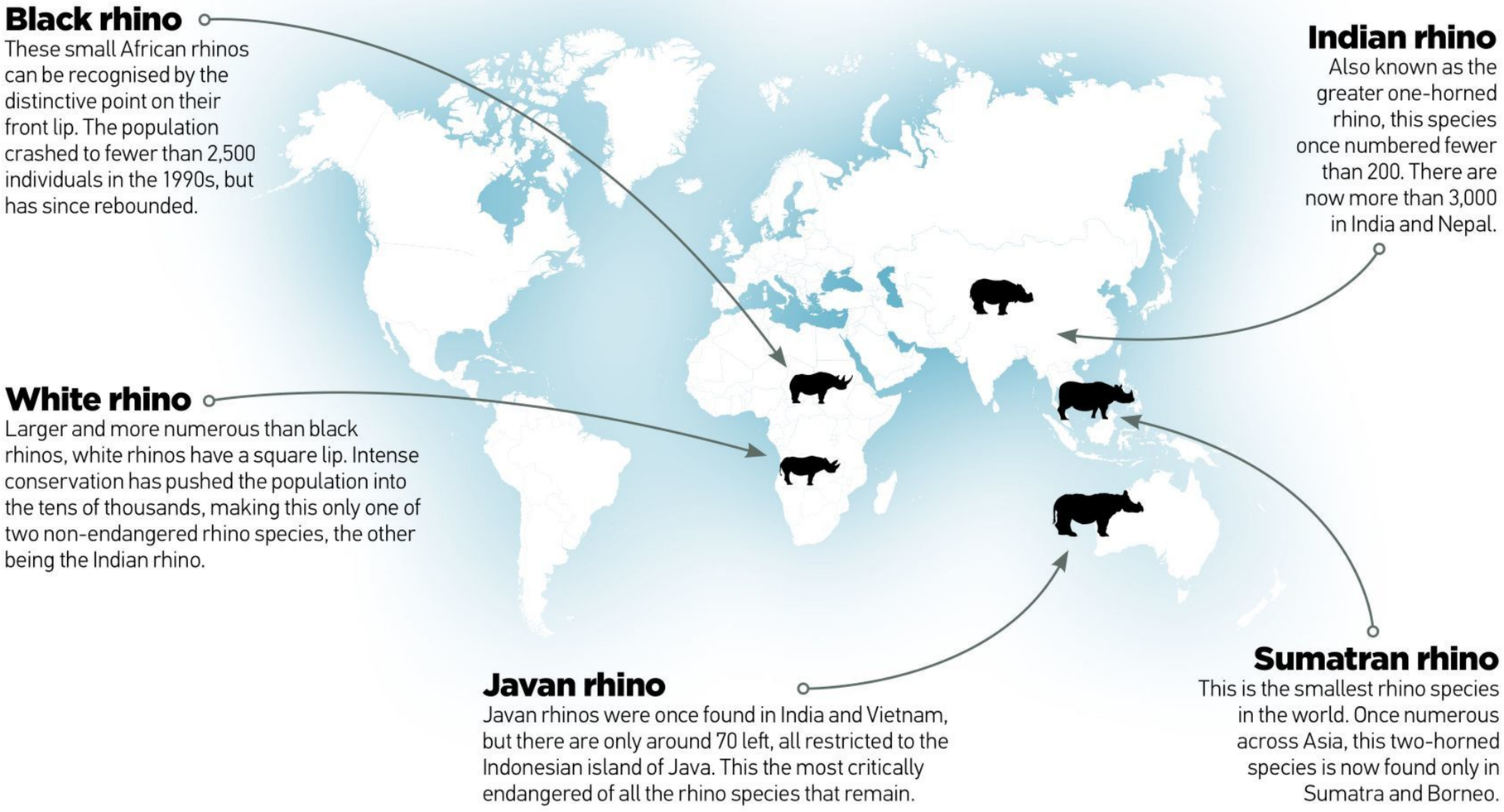
The plight of the rhino is yet another tragic reminder of humanity's ability to wipe out wildlife. However, thanks to conservationists, there are still chances to see these magnificent beasts

In March 2018, the last male northern white rhino, Sudan, was sadly put down. His death brings into sharp focus the impact human activity has had on these unique mammals. Only five species of rhino remain, two in Africa and three in Asia, and all of them are under threat.

Thankfully, conservation efforts are helping to bolster the remaining populations, and there's never been a better time to see this work in action. For an uplifting insight into conservation success, make your way to southern Africa, where white rhinos thrive.

Alternatively, for a chance to see the last few members of a critically endangered species, travel to Java in search of the elusive Javan rhino.

From the bush of Kruger National Park to the wetlands of Way Kambas, there is a rhino holiday to suit everyone.



Black rhino

These small African rhinos can be recognised by the distinctive point on their front lip. The population crashed to fewer than 2,500 individuals in the 1990s, but has since rebounded.

White rhino

Larger and more numerous than black rhinos, white rhinos have a square lip. Intense conservation has pushed the population into the tens of thousands, making this only one of two non-endangered rhino species, the other being the Indian rhino.

Indian rhino

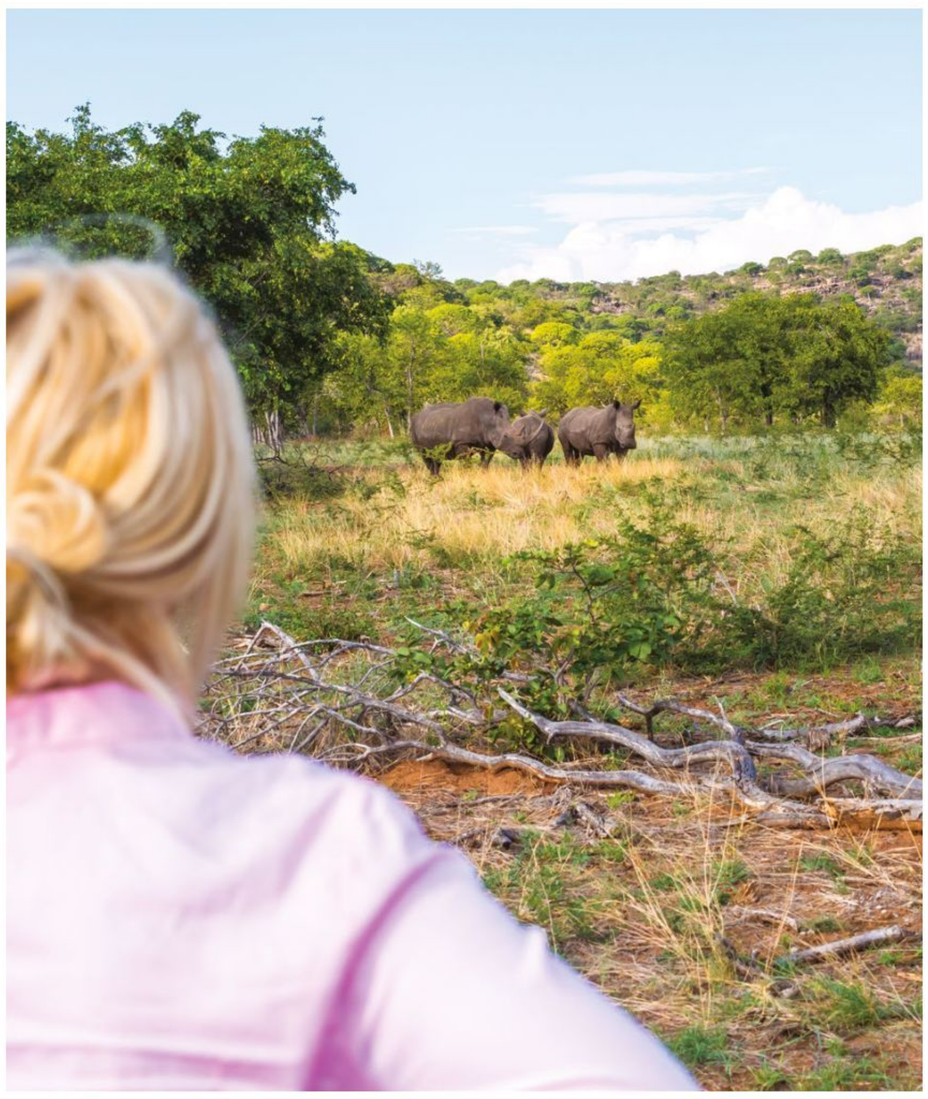
Also known as the greater one-horned rhino, this species once numbered fewer than 200. There are now more than 3,000 in India and Nepal.

Javan rhino

Javan rhinos were once found in India and Vietnam, but there are only around 70 left, all restricted to the Indonesian island of Java. This the most critically endangered of all the rhino species that remain.

Sumatran rhino

This is the smallest rhino species in the world. Once numerous across Asia, this two-horned species is now found only in Sumatra and Borneo.



© freevectormaps.com; Em Campos; Getty; Westend61

Travel guide

When to go

Visit Kruger Park in winter. Vegetation dries out between June and August, making the wildlife a lot easier to spot.

How to get there

Hop on a plane and fly to Africa or Asia to see rhinos in the wild, or you can see white rhinos at Longleat Safari Park in the UK.

The weather

Animals often cluster together during the hot dry season as they visit water holes. But an autumn or winter trip will be cooler.

What to take

A pair of good walking shoes are essential. It's also advisable to pack weatherproof layers, hats, sunglasses and sun cream too.

What you'll see

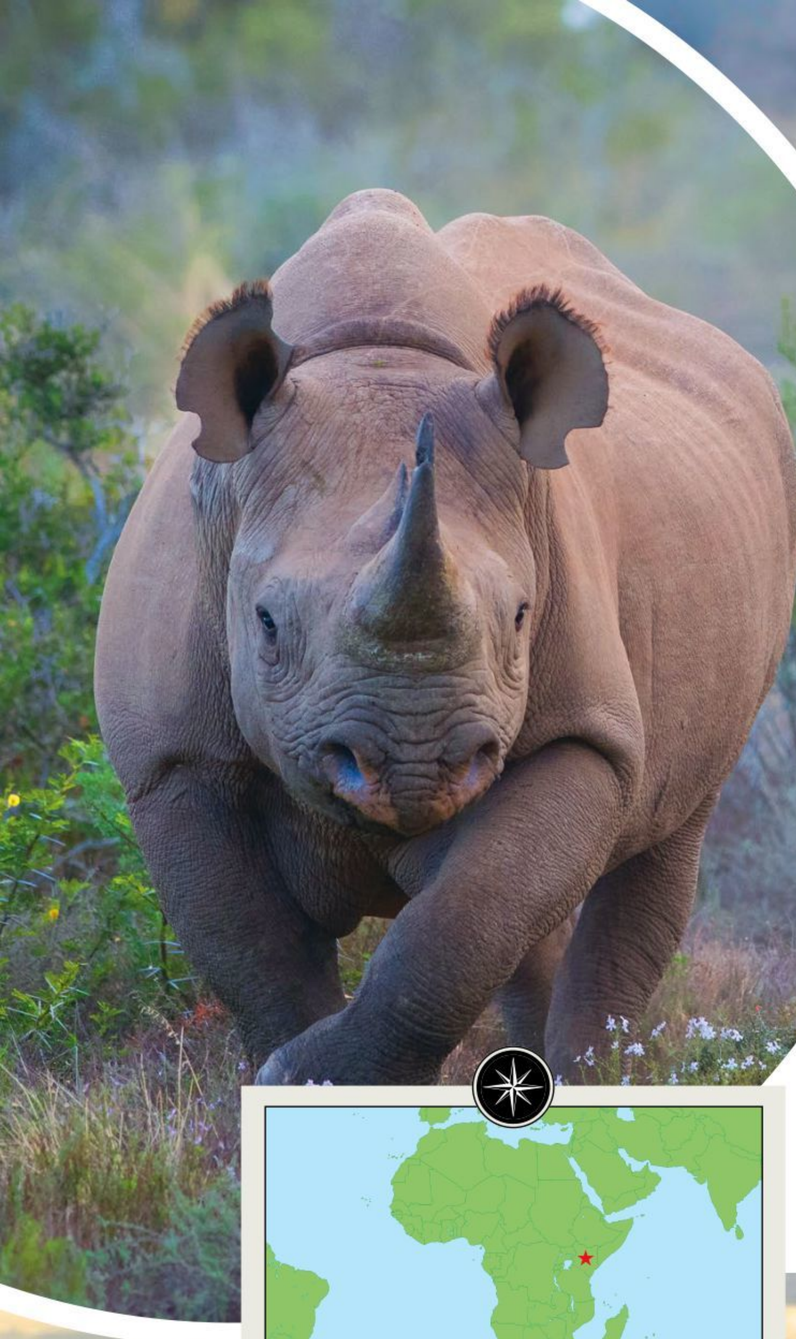
Rhinos are among the most endangered animals on the planet. Visit these gentle giants before it's too late.

Breaking barriers to save Africa's endangered rhino

Only 5,000 black rhinos remain in the wild, and their status is Critically Endangered. Victims of aggressive poaching, their numbers plummeted at the end of the 20th century, leaving the population severely dented. Numbers are now climbing thanks to conservation efforts, but poachers still pose a threat.

One of the best places to see them is the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya. They have championed rhino conservation since 1984, transforming a population of just 15 into a thriving community. In 2014, they removed the fence with their neighbouring Borana Conservancy, giving their rhinos 93,000 acres of safe space to roam in. Incredibly, the conservancy has witnessed no rhino poaching for three years.

Dotted with lodges and camps, the conservancy welcomes visitors, investing tourism funds back into conservation that helps to support rhinos and other endangered species. During your visit, you will also have the opportunity to spot the conservancy's 74 southern white rhinos, the largest population of Grevy's zebra in Kenya, hundreds of elephants, 25 lions, a pack of wild dogs, 13 cheetahs and 10 leopards. Conservation of rhinos not only saves the species, but also preserves large areas of land, providing much-needed protection for Africa's wildlife.



Kenya

5 amazing facts about rhinos

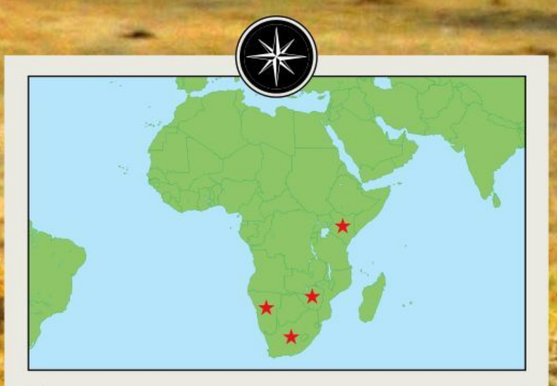
Nose horn
The name 'rhinoceros' literally means 'nose horn' in Greek. Two species have one horn and three species have two horns.

Hulking herbivores
Depending on the species, rhinos can weigh between 600–2,700 kilograms (1,320–5,950 pounds) and grow up to a length of 3.4 metres (11 feet).

Homemade sunscreen
Rhinos coat their skin in mud to protect it from bites and burns. They also live together with birds called oxpeckers that help to keep their skin clean by eating parasites.

Black and white
We call the African rhinos 'black' and 'white' but both are actually grey. White rhinos were originally called 'wide' rhinos for their square front lip.

No predators
The thick skin, dangerous horn and fast speed of adult rhinos make them a formidable foe for any carnivore. Depending on the species they can run at more than 50 kilometres (31 miles) per hour.



South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya

The species that came back from the brink

In the late 19th century, there were fewer than 100 southern white rhinos left in the wild – they were so scarce that many feared they were extinct. Fortunately, years of intensive conservation efforts have brought them back from the edge.

Today, they number in the tens of thousands. However, they are not out of the woods yet, and the species still faces immense pressure from poachers and habitat destruction. Even so, if you want to see what conservation can do for endangered animals, this species should be top of your travel list.

For a chance to see them in their natural habitat, head to one of their four home countries: South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. South Africa's Kruger National Park is home to more than 10,000 white rhinos. Rides in the south of this 4.7-million-acre site often involve rhino sightings.

The park recommends the dry season for visits as animals congregate around watering holes and are therefore often easier to spot, but you can go at any time, driving yourself or joining a tour. Switch off your engine when you get to a watering hole, and take the time to absorb savannah life.

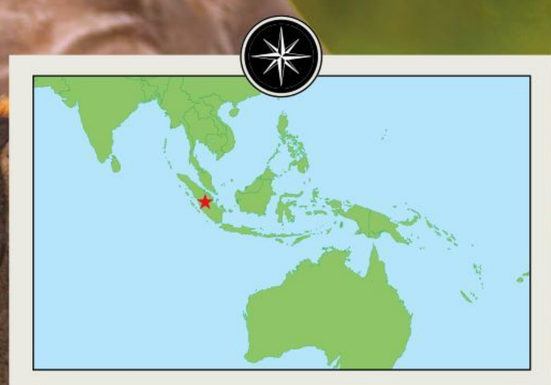
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The world's smallest rhino

The world's smallest rhino species is also one of the most endangered. There are fewer than 100 Sumatran rhinos left in the wild. With hairy skin, they share close ancestry with the woolly rhinos that roamed the ancient Earth, and they can be very hard to find.

Declared extinct in Malaysia in 2015, the best place to see them is at one of Indonesia's National Parks: Bukit Barisan Selatan, Gunung Leuser or Way Kambas. Here, anti-poaching units protect these vital rhinos. Trained by the International Rhino Foundation, they disarm traps, stop poachers and protect the environment from illegal logging.

Sumatran rhinos can be challenging to spot in the wild because they live in low-lying forests with dense plant life. They also travel alone, wandering far from their neighbours as they roam through the undergrowth. A trip to find them won't disappoint wildlife enthusiasts though; Sumatran rhinos share their home with many charismatic species, including Asian elephants, gibbons and tigers.



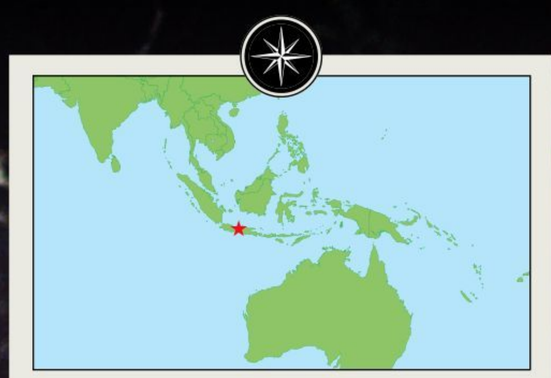
Sumatra, Indonesia

The final charge of Java's rhinos?

This is not only the most endangered rhino species, but it's also one of the most endangered land mammals on the planet – there are only around 70 Javan rhinos left in the wild.

There's only one place to go if you want to see one, for the remaining population are making their last stand in the Ujung Kulon National Park in Indonesia. They browse in the tropical rainforest and are easily identified by their single horn and armour-like skin. And, like their Sumatran counterparts, they live under heavy guard – the International Rhino Foundation rhino protection units watch them around the clock.

The park is a UNESCO world heritage site and an area of outstanding natural beauty. It's home to the now infamous Krakatoa volcano, which claimed 36,000 lives in 1883. The unique habitat is a must-visit for wildlife enthusiasts, offering the chance to see leopards, wild dogs, orangutans, gibbons and leaf monkeys.



Java, Indonesia

Asia's conservation success story

Also known as the Indian rhino, the greater one-horned rhino is the largest in the world, but like other rhino species, they faced a crisis in their recent history. Numbers dipped below 200 in the late 20th century, but intense conservation has stabilised the population. There are now more than 3,500 individuals in the wild. If you're heading to Asia, this is the rhino species you're most likely to see.

With the mythical-sounding Latin name *Rhinoceros unicornis*, these elusive creatures roam the wet grasslands of India and Nepal. If you're lucky, you might even spot one swimming. A popular destination for wildlife tourism is the Kaziranga National Park in India. It's a world heritage site offering safety to around two-thirds of the one-horned rhino population. The best time to visit is between November and April.



India, Nepal

© Getty: Ibrahim Suha Derbent; Jacek Kadaj; Alain Compost; Bospho 0/FLPA

Conservation close to home

A face-to-face encounter with a wild rhino is an experience few could ever forget, but we can't all make a trip into the bush. Luckily, there are lots of opportunities to see rhinos closer to home. As part of the conservation effort, zoos across the world care for endangered rhinos. In the UK, three specialist centres look after Indian rhinos, and seven house black rhinos, making critical contributions to ongoing breeding programmes.

Folly Farm in Pembrokeshire, UK, has three black rhinos: Dakima, Manyara and Nkosi; while Chester Zoo has a whole crash, including three calves born in the past two years. Chester also cares for a pair of Indian rhinos, Beni and Asha; and Edinburgh Zoo has a male Indian rhino called Bertus. For the full safari experience, West Midland Safari Park has a 'Wild Asia' enclosure, complete with Indian rhinos, Philippine spotted deer and swamp deer.



United Kingdom

The last of their kind

The two rhinos that you see in this picture are the last of their kind. Najin (right) and Fatu (left) are the only northern white rhinos left in the world.

Until recently, the pair lived with the last remaining male, Sudan, at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya, but in March 2018 the sanctuary made the difficult decision to put him to sleep. At the age of 45, Sudan suffered from many age-related health problems.

This tragic conservation story stands in stark contrast to the fate of the southern white rhino in South Africa. Poaching decimated both subspecies, but while the southern white rhino bounced back, its northern cousin did not. Now the only hope to save them is using in vitro fertilisation with frozen sperm.

Najin and Fatu live under 24-hour armed guard, but their enclosure is open to the public during the day, and the conservancy welcomes visitors. The non-profit organisation pours money from tourism back into conservation, helping to secure the future of other endangered species, like Grevy's zebra and Jackson's hartebeest.



Kenya

Top tips for seeing rhinos



Rise and shine

Rhinos get up before sunrise, and stay active after dusk to avoid the midday heat. Match their daily patterns for the best chance of a sighting.



Become a tracker

Channel your inner wildlife tracker and look out for signs. Male rhinos trample the grass, leaving distinctive wet patches on the ground.



Pick a national park

Rhinos are safest within the boundaries of national parks. For the best chance to come face-to-face with one of these ancient beasts, look for protected areas that focus on rhino conservation.



Stay safe

Rhinos can charge when threatened, and they move fast. If you get into trouble, don't try to run. Moving sideways, get behind a big tree and climb up. Otherwise drop to the floor.



Scan the bushes

Rhinos are surprisingly stealthy for such large animals. Remain vigilant for shadows or signs of movement, and scan your eyes left and right across the undergrowth.

© Getty; Gavin Haskell / Alamy; TONY KARUMBA; Lost Horizon Images

Who to travel with

Budget
Etosha

ETOSHANATIONALPARK.CO.ZA

Etosha Camping Safari
Enjoy three days in Etosha National Park where you can see black rhinos. From ~£315pp (~$405).

Family
Go2Africa

GO2AFRICA.COM

Family Kruger & Victoria Falls
Search for rhinos along with the other Big Five in Kruger National Park. From £3,355pp ($4,415).

Luxury
Natural World Safaris

NATURALWORLDSAFARIS.COM

Rhinos, Temples and Tigers of India
Take a tailor-made 15-day safari exploring India's wildlife – including the one-horned rhino – in Bandhavgarh National Park. From £3,245pp (~$4,560).

Alternative safaris

Wildlife adventures don't start and end with being driven in a jeep around the famous game parks of Africa. It's time to redefine the 'safari holiday', or else risk missing out on all the other amazing nature experiences that are up for grabs

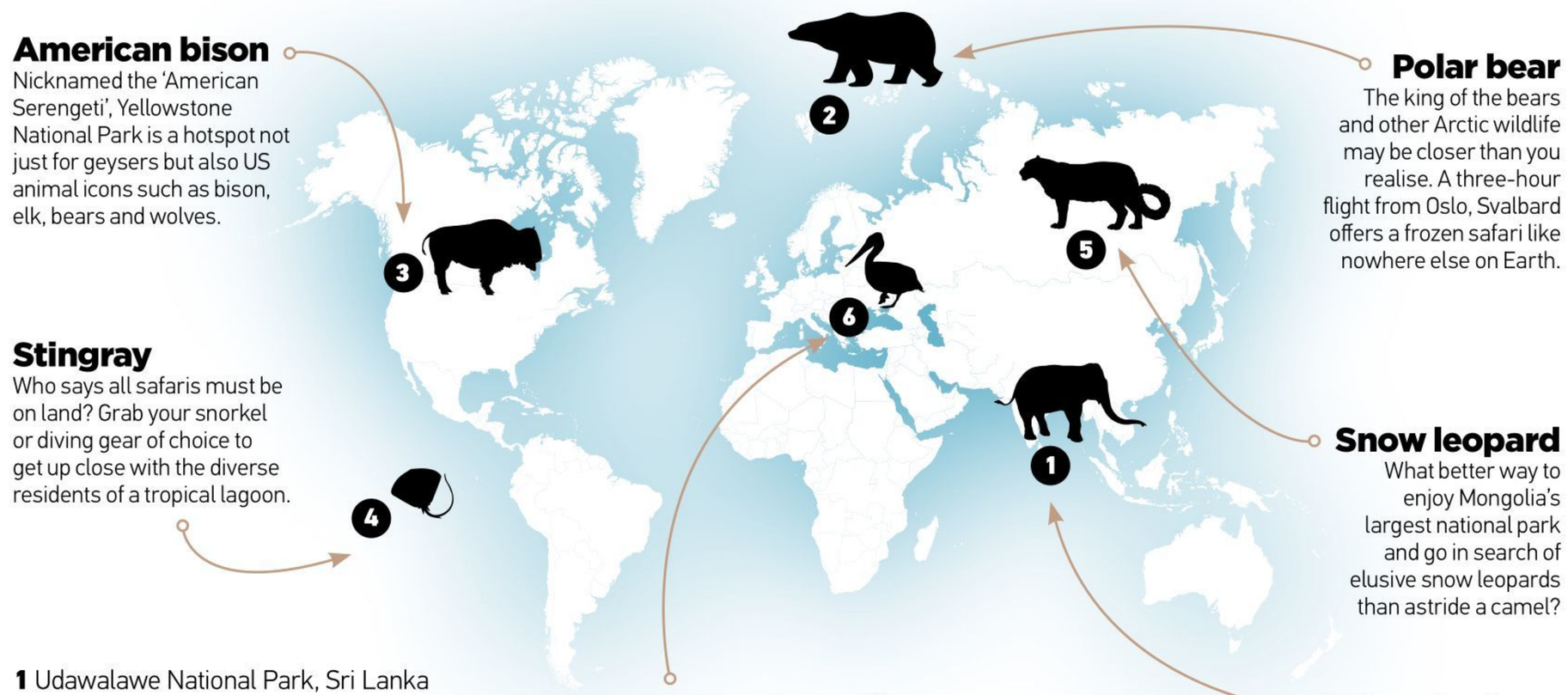
Words **Adam Millward**

Travel expert

Helen Byron is a wildlife consultant for Wildlife Worldwide, which offers a huge selection of safari holidays – both traditional and alternative

"There is something primeval about the sound of a lion roaring just metres from you in the dark of an African night; even more so if you're on a walking safari with all senses on high alert.

Don't just limit yourself to Africa though, as the morning light and dawn chorus in India's tiger country is magical. Why not try Sri Lanka for leopards? Why, in fact, stick to a vehicle? There are boat safaris cruising Brazil's Pantanal wetlands on the search for jaguar, or along Borneo's riverbanks looking for primates and elephants. Why not walk with bears in Canada? Or hope for lynx in Spain? There are horse-riding, mountain-biking and hot-air-ballooning safaris. In fact, one of my all-time favourite trips was a whale safari off the coast of Baja, Mexico. Think outside the box and the world will be your oyster."



American bison
Nicknamed the 'American Serengeti', Yellowstone National Park is a hotspot not just for geysers but also US animal icons such as bison, elk, bears and wolves.

Stingray
Who says all safaris must be on land? Grab your snorkel or diving gear of choice to get up close with the diverse residents of a tropical lagoon.

Polar bear
The king of the bears and other Arctic wildlife may be closer than you realise. A three-hour flight from Oslo, Svalbard offers a frozen safari like nowhere else on Earth.

Snow leopard
What better way to enjoy Mongolia's largest national park and go in search of elusive snow leopards than astride a camel?

Dalmatian pelican
Swamps are some of the most species-rich habitats, so it stands to reason that Europe's largest wetland makes for a top safari. Birdwatchers are in for a treat!

Asian elephant
Elephants are one of the stars of any classic safari, but Africa doesn't have a monopoly on these popular pachyderms. Asian elephants are just one of the alternative 'Big Five' that you can see in Sri Lanka.

1 Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka
2 Tempelfjorden, Svalbard, Norway
3 Lamar Valley, Wyoming, US
4 Bora Bora Lagoon, French Polynesia
5 Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park, Mongolia
6 Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, Romania



© Getty Images; freevectormaps.com

Travel guide

When to go
The dry season is generally the optimum time for sightings. Note that the dry season won't necessarily coincide with summer.

How to get there
A flight will get you to your destination, but for the safari itself you'll transfer to cross-country (or cross-water) transport.

What the weather will do
On an African safari you'll get hot days and the odd storm, but on an alternative safari you may get rain, wind or even snow.

What to take
Clothes should be light, layered and comfortable, and provide decent coverage if you're susceptible to insect bites.

What you'll see
A wild safari isn't like a safari park. No sightings are ever assured, and it's worth reining in expectations. Try to savour everything you do get to see.

Meet the other 'Big Five'

It's the familiar mode of transport, but it's not the familiar destination. Sri Lanka has long been lauded as one of the best 4x4 safari destinations outside of Africa. It even boasts its very own version of the 'Big Five', though admittedly a couple of its members dwell in the Indian Ocean around the island nation, so you'll have to transfer from the jeep to a boat at some point.

Asia's take on the 'Big Five' comprises the Asian elephant, the leopard, the sloth bear, the sperm whale and, more than earning its place in the line-up, the blue whale.

One of the best places to see herds of Asian elephants roaming in the wild is Udawalawe National Park in the south of the island; about 400 can be found here at any one time. Since 1995, it has also been the location of the Elephant Transit Home, a semi-wild reserve on the border of Udawalawe where baby elephants are cared for and wander free in preparation for release into the park proper. Feeding time is no small affair for these hungry, hungry jumbos, and the meals are available for the public to watch four times a day: 9am, midday, 3pm and 6pm.

From one of the giants of the land to the largest animal to have ever lived on Earth, just a couple of hours' drive from Udawalawe is the seaside town of Mirissa. The deep waters that lie relatively close to the coast here are widely considered Sri Lanka's most likely location to catch a glimpse of the monumental blue whale.



Asia

Go on a 'snow-fari'



Despite the stereotype, not all safaris take place in tropical locations. The island group of Svalbard, which lies deep within the Arctic Circle about 885 kilometres (550 miles) north of Norway, is a surprising 'hotspot' when it comes to wildlife. On land, the archipelago hosts Arctic foxes, rock ptarmigans, snow buntings and even its very own species of reindeer, the smallest member of the Rangifer family.

By far the biggest attraction – both figuratively and literally – is the 3,000-strong population of polar bears that reside in and around Svalbard. Most people opt to take a cruise around the islands' coastline, where snow bears like to hunt for seals. These sea-based safaris also offer the chance to view other hardy Arctic marine fauna such as walruses, beluga whales and, if you're lucky, narwhals. Alternatively, if you'd rather stay on terra firma, sign up for an exhilarating snowmobile trip. Fjords like Billefjorden and Tempelfjorden, which freeze over during the winter months, are prime locations for polar bear sightings.

Before planning your trip, be mindful that, due to its northerly latitude, Svalbard experiences almost perpetual twilight during the winter (October to February) and almost perpetual light in the summer months (April to August); the latter is regarded as the best time to see bears, owing to the extended days and greater access afforded by fragmenting sea ice.



Svalbard, Norway

Alternative African safaris



Hot-air balloon

Ditch the jeep and get a bird's-eye view of the game park from a balloon. Throw in a stunning sunrise or sunset and you're set for a magical experience.



Hike

There's nothing quite as intimate – or as adrenaline pumping – as walking through the bush not knowing what lies behind the next tree. Just be sure to stick close to your guide.



Canoe

In water-logged or swampy regions like the Okavango Delta in Botswana, canoes like the traditional *mokoro* are the best way to get up close with the local fauna.



Horseback

Keen riders will not want to miss a saddle-based safari. Horses' attuned senses are much better than ours at detecting nearby wildlife.



All-terrain vehicle

Jeep tours are fine, but sometimes you just want to be in the driver's seat. Quad bikes allow access to areas that 4x4s could not venture into, such as fragile dunes.

© Getty Images

Paddle around Europe's largest wetland

Wetlands are some of the most biodiverse regions on Earth, but you don't have to go to South America to enjoy the riches of this watery biome.

One of Europe's best-known rivers, the Danube, spills out into the Black Sea in Romania. The protected delta where the land meets the sea contains areas of fresh, brackish and salt water, making it a haven for all sorts of flora and fauna – particularly birds.

Not surprisingly, the vehicle of choice here is a boat, but depending on how energetic you're feeling, these vary from single-seater kayaks to 'floating hotel' barges. Whichever vessel you opt for, you're guaranteed to see some of the richest avifauna on the continent, such as swans, eagles and ibises, vultures, cranes and giant Dalmatian pelicans.

For a chance to stretch your legs, take an afternoon stroll through the ancient forest of Caraorman – a mix of oak trees and liana vines – where it's possible to see boar, golden jackals, Eurasian eagle owls and ospreys, then stop off for lunch in the local fishing village.



Romania

Where the buffalo roam

You'll be hard-pressed to find anyone who hasn't heard of the Serengeti National Park on the Tanzania-Kenya border. The setting of *The Lion King* is probably the most famous safari reserve on the planet, home to all the African icons, but did you know the US has its very own take on this wildlife wonderland?

Yellowstone is perhaps better known for its geysers and volcanic features, but the world's oldest national park isn't lacking when it comes to living nature either. In fact, the Lamar Valley in the northeast of the reserve has been dubbed the 'American Serengeti' owing to its impressive showcase of 'Stars and Stripes' wildlife.

Herds of buffalo, wolf packs, elk, bighorn sheep, grizzly bears, bald eagles: the locals couldn't be any more US of A. Better yet, because of its out-of-the-way location on the upper loop of Yellowstone's figure-of-eight roadway – the opposite side to the main tourist draw of the Old Faithful geyser – you'll feel as if you have this beautiful wilderness to yourself most of the time. To get here, enter the park via the northeastern entrance ($35 entrance fee, but some public holidays are free); the Lamar Valley is a 30-minute drive from Cooke City in Montana.



North America

Explore the Gobi by camel

It's a common misconception that all deserts are 'deserted'. Know where to look and you might be surprised by the number of animals that have adapted to this extreme terrain, making them a prime destination for a safari with a difference. Take Gurvan Saikhan National Park on the fringes of the Gobi Desert in southern Mongolia.

For starters, the country's largest national park offers some jaw-dropping vistas that include grassy steppes, rugged canyons and mountains, salt wetlands and perhaps most famously Khongoryn Els – the 'singing sands', so-called for the eerie sounds produced by the wind passing through the dunes. The area counts more than 240 birds among its long-term residents, including the bone-dropping lammergeier vulture, and more than 50 mammal species. You have the chance of spotting the elusive snow leopard here (though it's more likely you'll find their tracks), as well as Gobi wolves, chinchilla-like pikas and mountain ruminants such as ibex and argali, the world's largest wild sheep.

The native two-humped Bactrian camel is certainly the most traditional way of getting around these parts, with single or multi-day treks available. But if you prefer a slightly less smelly, motorised 'ship of the desert', jeep tours are also an option.



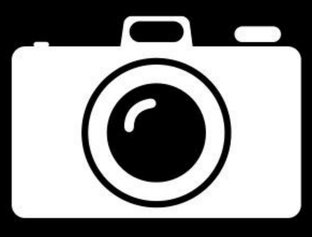
Must-have safari gear



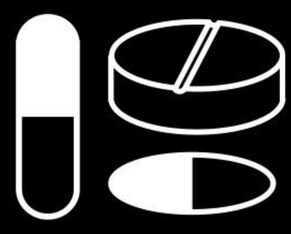
Optical aid
Wildlife rarely conveniently presents itself directly in front of eager safari tourists. With this in mind, it's worth investing in a decent pair of binoculars. Or for something less bulky, consider trying out a monoscope.



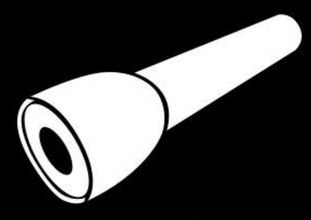
Weather protection
Safaris can involve a lot of waiting around in the elements, so come prepared. As well as a light cagoule in case of showers, bring a wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen and an extra layer for the cooler evenings.



Photography kit
While a DSLR might give you greater range and higher-quality shots, it means you are lumbered carrying a bulky bag. A bridge camera – something in between a compact and a DSLR – might be the way to go.



The right meds
Tropical safaris can often mean inoculations or medication. To avoid last-minute stress and fees, arrange a meeting with the travel nurse at your GP surgery two months before you go or gen up at **travelhealthpro.org.uk**.



Torch
For those camping out in safari territory, the chances are light is going to be limited at night. Avoid bumping into things, entering the wrong tent or stepping on any critters by packing a mini flashlight.

© Getty Images



Hang out with the 'high life' in Costa Rica

It's no secret that the rainforests of Central America are teeming with wildlife, which you'd think would make countries like Costa Rica a no-brainer safari destination. Where it is at a slight disadvantage – compared to Africa's open savanna – is that finding the animals can be trickier amid the vegetation.

One way to help overcome this obstacle is to head up. The treetops are home to the vast majority of a jungle's biodiversity, from the expected plethora of colourful birds (macaws, toucans, hummingbirds) and butterflies (malachites, glasswings, blue morphos), to frogs, lizards, monkeys and, of course, sloths. There are several ways to enjoy this multistorey ecosystem up close, including eco-lodge treehouses, where you can fall asleep and wake immersed by the raucous cacophony of the canopy.

Alternatively, for those short on time and/or funds, there are several one-day options. Adrenaline junkies can ride on high-speed ziplines through the jungle, or for a more leisurely approach, there are suspended walkways and bridges. At Veragua Rainforest, on the border of La Amistad National Park, there's even an aerial tram (pictured) to guide you on a gondola.

Dive into Bora Bora's natural aquarium

When it comes down to it, one of the biggest draws of any safari is the chance to see a lot of different animals in a relatively small area. If that's your primary objective, then perhaps your next safari should not only look beyond the continent of Africa, but land altogether. That's because coral reefs, by area, are the richest ecosystems on Earth.

While certain locations immediately spring to mind, such as Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the Red Sea and Caribbean islands, if you're looking to really get away from it all, consider Bora Bora. This French Polynesian island in the heart of the South Pacific is pretty much the picture-perfect definition of paradise, with its powder-white-sand beaches, turquoise waters and luxury resorts. Its crystal-clear lagoon, fringed by reefs, contains all manner of marine life, from clownfish, parrotfish and unicornfish to sharks, dolphins, sea turtles and squadrons of sting rays and manta rays.

Snorkelling and scuba diving are the go-to means of enjoying this bounty of sea life, but hydrophobes shouldn't despair. Glass-bottomed boats offer a window into this ocean sanctuary from the surface, or for a totally immersive (and surreal) experience, you can take a stroll on the lagoon's sandy seabed without getting a hair on your head wet, all thanks to special weighted diving helmets that are fed oxygen via tubes from a boat above.



Top alternative safari tips

Safari now, relax later

Be sure to go on absolutely every single tour or activity on offer – even if it means an early start or if the weather's looking dicey. Just imagine how gutted you would be if you opted to sleep in on the one occasion that your favourite animal decides to put in an appearance!

Colour matters

When packing for your safari, remember that comfort and thermoregulation aren't the only considerations. Avoid white and vivid colours or you'll stand out a mile, and tailor your wear to the terrain you will be in – so tan/khaki for arid areas, and greens for jungle or grassland.

Solo vs group

Before you decide on which safari to book, make sure you know what you want to get out of it. For instance, if your main aim is to capture quality photos then you'll probably want to avoid a general group package and instead pay extra for a smaller or even private tour.

Who to travel with

Budget
Discover Danube Delta
DISCOVERDANUBEDELTA.COM

Danube Delta Kayak Tour
You'll need to bring your own tent for this guided kayaking tour of the Danube Delta, ranging from two to five days. From ~£110pp (~$140).

Family
Wildlife Worldwide
WILDLIFEWORLDWIDE.COM

Jungles, Tigers & Taj
See India's national parks, home to tigers and much more with this 15-day family-friendly itinerary. From £3,695 (~$4,740) per adult or £2,095 (~$2,700) per child, including flights.

Luxury
Scenic Air Safaris
SCENICAIRSAFARIS.COM

Endangered Species Flying Safari
This exhilarating nine-day Kenyan safari in your own private aircraft will take you over the Great Rift Valley, the Maasai Mara National Game Reserve and more. From ~£1,100pp ($1,425).

© Getty Images; Kryssia Campos

Stunning Locations

72 Iceland
80 Greece
88 South Africa
96 Madagascar
104 Mauritius
112 China
120 Borneo
128 Australia
136 New Zealand
144 Canada
152 Costa Rica
160 Brazil
168 The Antarctic








104


120


128


152


168


112



Iceland

Witness the animals that roam the land where tectonic plates meet, water boils beneath the ground, and the northern lights paint the night sky

Words **Amy Grisdale**

Wild Iceland

Iceland's vast plains are wild and rugged, but the country's flora and fauna have been greatly influenced by its human settlers

Iceland's wildlife has been shaped almost entirely by human activity, as there are few native mammals on the island, and many species that visitors go to see are either introduced or domesticated. As people began to settle on the previously uninhabited country in the late ninth century, more and more species were introduced. At least 32 invasive species found their way to Iceland over the years, from American mink that escaped fur farms to the Chinese mitten crab that migrated from the Far East. Birds and marine mammals, however, have been visiting the country for thousands of years to enjoy its fish-filled fjords, and are still sighted to this day. The country is on the edge of the Arctic Circle, and its unique fauna live alongside breathtaking geographical landforms, making it an incredibly rewarding destination.



Arctic fox
Though found throughout most of the country, the west fjords are home to The Arctic Fox Centre with local guides that can help visitors spot the elusive creatures.

Grey seal
Common around most of the country's coast, these hardy marine mammals can be seen frolicking in shallow waters or resting on rocks.

Orca
As a cosmopolitan species, the largest species of dolphin can be found in any body of water around the world, but have returned to Iceland's Grundarfjörður year after year.

1 Þingvellir National Park
2 Vatnajökull National Park
3 Ásbyrgi Canyon
4 Skaftafell National Park

Puffin
Found along the coasts during the summer months, the largest population can be seen on the Westman islands, which is a short ferry ride from the mainland.

Humpback whale
Húsavík in Skjálfandi Bay is inundated with filter feeding humpbacks throughout the summer months, hungrily building up fat reserves to see them through winter.

Reindeer
Though not native to Iceland, there are strongholds of feral reindeer in the higher elevations of the east, as they were found difficult to domesticate by 18th-century farmers.

Icelandic horse
Though they aren't wild animals, the equines of Iceland are extremely popular with visitors to the Golden Circle. Strict laws prevent other horses being introduced, and exported horses are not allowed back into the country.



© Getty Images; Thinkstock

Travel guide

When to go
Summer is the best time for wildlife, but you'll have a better chance of catching the northern lights in winter.

How to get there
Reykjavik Keflavik airport accepts direct flights from all over the world, but nervous fliers could take a cruise.

The weather
Despite the name, Iceland isn't very prone to snow. Instead, it is generally cold in the summer, but still sunny with clear skies.

What to take
The country is ideal for walking so a good pair of boots are a must, along with a proper winter jacket to keep you warm.

What you'll see
Even if you're not lucky enough to spot a single wild animal, you're guaranteed to see Icelandic horses and the country's incredible volcanic landscapes.

Spy a colour-changing Arctic fox on the hunt

Iceland is one of the southernmost points of the Arctic fox's range, and it's the only terrestrial mammal native to the country. In winter, its fur is white to blend in with the intermittent snow, and throughout the summer it takes on a grey-brown colour. This shade is actually called blue, and the summer fur is much thinner than the thick white tufts that sprout in winter.

The Icelandic population feeds mostly on birds and eggs, scouring cliffs for nests. They have no competing carnivores to contend with, meaning they have a fairly stable population, though they thrive in areas with high bird populations. If food is scarce, foxes will turn to scavenging on carrion, picking out invertebrates or feasting on berries.

Unfortunately, the Arctic fox has been hunted over centuries, as Icelandic farmers viewed it as a threat to sheep. Its fur was once prized, but the introduction of fur farms greatly decreased the hunting pressure and now many fox areas are protected.

Family groups live in dens with up to eight entrances and a system of tunnels. They cover up to 30 square metres (320 square feet), and typically contain an adult male, two vixens and their cubs. Dens provide an ideal hiding place for surplus food collected in the summer, and can be in use for hundreds of years, passing down through generations.



A flurry of feathers

Seabirds thrive along the coasts of Iceland, both in the water and on land. Guillemots, razorbills and puffins nest on clifftops, and are surprisingly tolerant of visitors.

Ducks are a common sight in coastal waters, from eiders to harlequin ducks. They dive into the icy depths to find food, such as sea urchins, and can stay submerged for up to 60 seconds. Many birds in Iceland are migratory and leave for southern spots if the winters get too harsh. Whooper swans head to the British Isles around November to escape the approaching cold. Geese and wading birds like plovers often stop off in Iceland to break up the journey between northern Greenland and the southern hemisphere.

Despite the lack of small mammals in the country, there are three species of owl. Long-eared, short-eared and snowy owls are an increasing sight, especially at dusk during late summer. In total, more than 370 bird species have been spotted over the years, many of which are in such large numbers that Iceland holds a significant chunk of the world's population.

More than wildlife



Geothermal springs

Hot water bubbles up from the ground to form hot springs, the most famous of which is Blue Lagoon. It's situated in a northern lights hotspot so going at night is a good idea.



Hike on ice

Take a tour to see rivers of ice that have shaped the landscape. Tour operators offer snowmobile or 4x4 trips for those less willing to walk.



The Golden Circle

Take the popular trail to see where tectonic plates touch, geysers spurt and waterfalls crash. Take a tour or drive yourself.



Explore the capital

Get souvenirs, peruse museums and admire the city's artwork while enjoying the view of Reykjavik's spectacular harbour.



The northern lights

Not all visitors to Iceland are lucky enough to see the northern lights, so take a tour or check the online forecast before going to find the stunning display.

Watch whales and dolphins

Iceland is the whale watching capital of the world, and throughout the summer the entire island is surrounded. Arguably the best place in the country is Húsavík on the north coast where visitors can see humpbacks, orcas or more obscure animals like the northern bottlenose whale. The cold waters of the north Atlantic are rich in food, and attract more than 20 different whale species. Large whales like blues and minkes filter feed on small marine organisms, while toothed whales like white-beaked dolphins and sperm whales feed on larger fish and squid. Some species are migratory, like the humpback, and spend their summers gorging themselves on the fishy feast available. Whale watch guides help passengers spot marine mammals, and companies offer eco-friendly tours, operating according to strict guidelines to prevent the animals suffering any distress.

Peek on a nesting puffin

Despite generations of hunting and egg theft, Icelandic puffins are not afraid of humans, and will allow tourists to get close to their nests. Trips like these should be taken with professional companies to ensure the environment does not get damaged and, most importantly, no birds are disturbed or injured.

Over 60% of the world's Atlantic puffin population live in Iceland, though they only venture onto land during breeding season. They are fantastically adapted to live on the open ocean, and can dive as deep as 60 metres (200 feet). This affinity for swimming does not hinder the puffin's aerial ability, however – these birds can flap their wings up to 400 times in 60 seconds.

The brightly coloured feet and bills help puffins pick suitable mates. Birds with bright-orange beaks are more likely to be selected as a partner as this indicates good health, and as puffins mate for life it's important that they choose wisely.

Feel festive with real reindeer

This is the only deer species in which both males and females have antlers. Males engage in gruesome battles, and the winners are awarded with groups of up to 15 females. During the rut, males don't eat, and lose a large chunk of their body mass, though it's worth it when their newborn calves arrive in late spring.





Feed hardy Icelandic horses

Though a common sight around rural areas of the country, tour guides will often stop to show their guests roadside horses. In fact, visitors can go to ranches to ride or even take a horseback tour.

Introduced to Iceland more than 1,100 years ago, they're the last remaining members of an otherwise extinct breed. They're sure-footed on any terrain and well insulated to defend against snow and chilling winds.



See playful seals on the coast

Almost all of the Icelandic coast is seal territory, and many calm inlets like fjords and sheltered beaches are swimming with both grey and common seals. They are opportunistic feeders, searching the sea bed for fish, crustaceans and molluscs. Recent research even suggests that grey seals will attack harbour porpoises when in need of a quick meal.

Common seals use their whiskers to detect prey under water, and find their food even if they cannot hear or see. Seals have 1,500 nerve endings in each whisker, which is eight times the number in a single cat whisker. They are extremely sensitive and shaped differently to those of other mammals, and their structure gives their whiskers a unique property. While the animal is swimming, the whiskers can stay relatively still and only vibrate in response to moving prey in the surrounding water.

Animal tourists



Polar bear

The largest terrestrial carnivore can occasionally find its way to Iceland purely by accident, floating over on the ice sheets.



Narwhal

The bizarre sword-faced whale, also known as the unicorn of the sea, has been seen in Icelandic waters but is usually only found in the waters of the Arctic and between Greenland and Canada.



Common crane

Though this bird is found throughout mainland Europe and northern Africa, it has been known to pop up in Iceland from time to time.



Raccoon

In 1932, a captive raccoon escaped from Reykjavik. In 1975, another escaped from Hafnafjörður Aquarium, and a third was found in 1998.



Booted eagle

These large eagles make rare appearances in Iceland, though the lack of small mammals and reptiles to feed on means they don't stay long.

Peep at ringed plover parents

Found on sandy or stony terrain close to water, these active wading birds are caring parents. Both the male and female incubate the eggs, and if their nest is approached by a predator the plover will tear away to lure the threat from its precious eggs.

Young plovers leave the nest almost immediately after hatching, but may shelter underneath their mother if they do not feel safe enough to make a break for it.

See salmon leap upstream

Iceland has only five species of freshwater fish, three of which are in the salmon family. The Elliðaár river in eastern Reykjavik is the ideal spot to see these fish going against the flow to reach their spawning grounds in late July to early August.

Once the fish reach their destination, they release their reproductive matter into the water. Young fish spend their lives in the safety of streams but find their way to the ocean in adulthood.

Top tips

Keep to a budget
Iceland has a reputation for being expensive, but there are ways to keep costs down. Avoid alcohol, which is heavily taxed, and try to get self-catering accommodation like camping or staying in a hostel. Hire a car to avoid paying for expensive tours.

Boycott whale meat
Whaling is still legal in Iceland, and many restaurants serve minke meat. Don't eat at establishments that have whale on the menu, and be careful tasting samples at indoor markets if you're not sure what they are.

Choose your season carefully
As a country with a high latitude, Iceland has varying daylight hours throughout the year. Check the sunrise and sunset times online to ensure you book at the right time. Late August is a good time, as there are still whales in the water but enough hours of darkness to see the northern lights.

Golden rules for Icelandic photography



Capture the aurora
Snapping the northern lights can be a challenge. Use a sturdy tripod and set your exposure time to 30 seconds or longer. Make sure your camera is on manual focus. Find a spot with minimal artificial light for pin-sharp images.



Adjust to low light
Winter days are short in Iceland, and if it's getting dark, you still want to be able to use your camera. First, use a large aperture to let in as much light as possible, and slow down your shutter speed. You can also increase the ISO, but your pictures may become grainy.



Freeze whales in frame
To capture whale photos, keep your viewfinder to your eye and don't zoom until you've spied your target. Take bursts of photos to ensure you capture the action, and keep your shutter speed high. Follow the lighter parts of its body until it surfaces to breathe.



Create magical waterfalls
It's hard to get that misty effect in images. The key is to show that the water is moving, so try a slow shutter speed to create motion blur. Use a tripod or rest your camera on a solid surface and experiment with exposure times starting with one to two seconds.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Evaneos Travel
EVANEOS.CO.UK
Southern Iceland Road Trip
A week-long self-drive tour of the southern coast. From £840pp (~$1,080).

Family
Original Travel
ORIGINALTRAVEL.CO.UK
A Family Adventure in Iceland
Seven-day family-friendly tour exploring the great outdoors. From £2,500pp (~$3,210).

Luxury
Steppes Travel
STEPPESTRAVEL.CO.UK
Iceland – Land of Fire and Ice
Nine days seeing Reykjavic, volcanoes, wildlife and more. From £5,500pp (~$7,050).



Greece

From rugged mountains and wild forests to some of the Mediterranean's most unspoilt islands, it's no wonder that Greece is often billed as Europe's greatest biodiversity hotspot

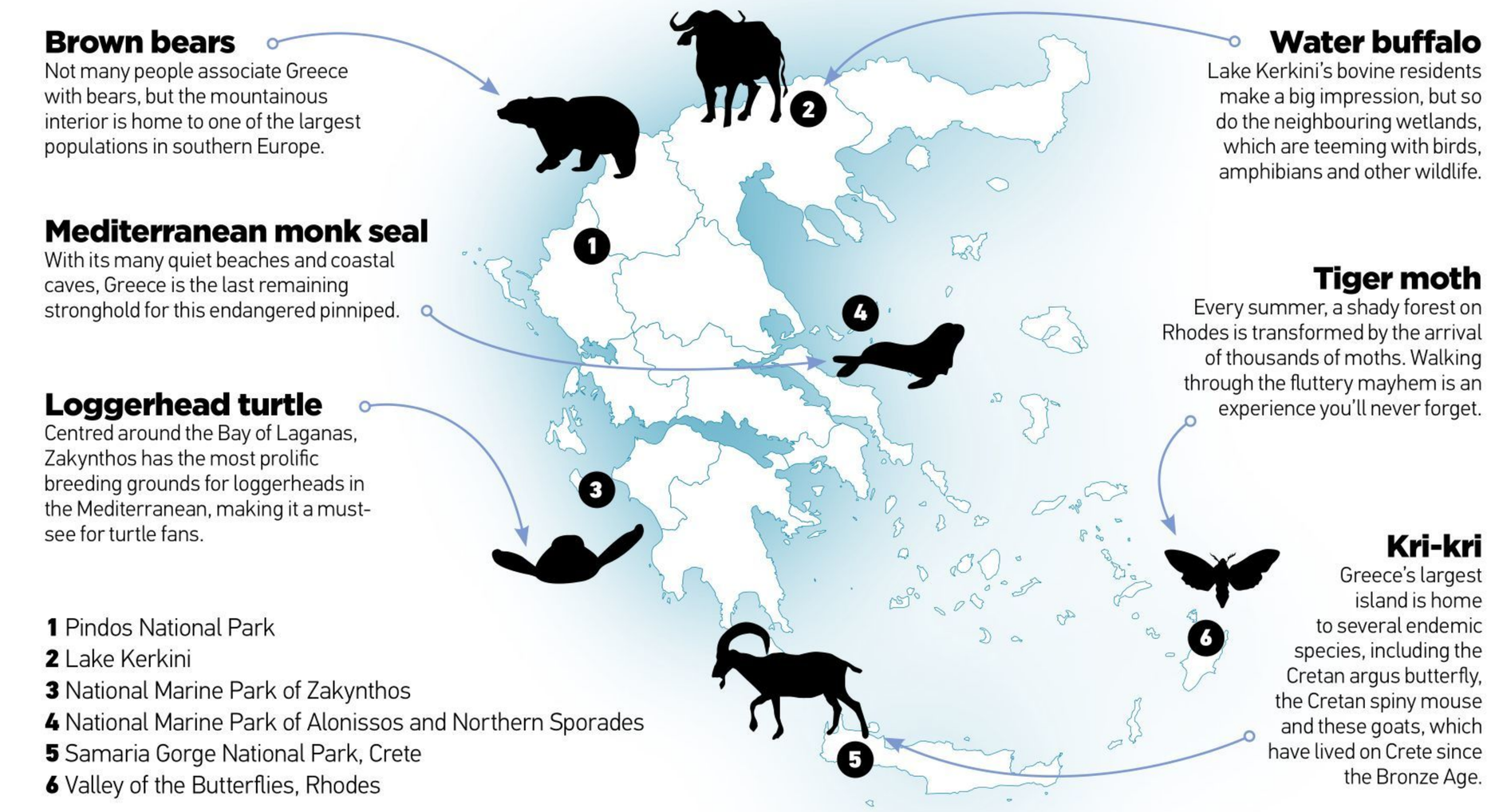
Words **Adam Millward**



Travel expert

Chantel Kyriakopoulou-Beuvink is the founder and owner of Natural Greece, a tour operator offering a range of expert-led wildlife and bird-watching tours in Greece

"Greece has arguably the highest biodiversity known in Europe. Its varied and fragmented landscape, its position at the crossroads of three continents and its climate all contribute to this. Thousands of miles of coastline and countless islands create the perfect habitat for species like Mediterranean monk seals and loggerhead sea turtles. An estimated 500 brown bears roam the high mountains, valleys and forests of northern Greece, while the wolf has made a strong comeback too. The wildlife charity Callisto even confirmed the presence of wolves in the mountains surrounding Athens! Birds like the Dalmatian pelican, the pygmy cormorant and the glossy ibis inhabit the wetlands and rivers of Greece. The fauna of Greek reptiles is the most abundant of Europe, with 59 species including lizards, turtles, geckoes, tortoises and terrapins."



Brown bears
Not many people associate Greece with bears, but the mountainous interior is home to one of the largest populations in southern Europe.

Mediterranean monk seal
With its many quiet beaches and coastal caves, Greece is the last remaining stronghold for this endangered pinniped.

Loggerhead turtle
Centred around the Bay of Laganas, Zakynthos has the most prolific breeding grounds for loggerheads in the Mediterranean, making it a must-see for turtle fans.

1 Pindos National Park
2 Lake Kerkini
3 National Marine Park of Zakynthos
4 National Marine Park of Alonissos and Northern Sporades
5 Samaria Gorge National Park, Crete
6 Valley of the Butterflies, Rhodes

Water buffalo
Lake Kerkini's bovine residents make a big impression, but so do the neighbouring wetlands, which are teeming with birds, amphibians and other wildlife.

Tiger moth
Every summer, a shady forest on Rhodes is transformed by the arrival of thousands of moths. Walking through the fluttery mayhem is an experience you'll never forget.

Kri-kri
Greece's largest island is home to several endemic species, including the Cretan argus butterfly, the Cretan spiny mouse and these goats, which have lived on Crete since the Bronze Age.



© Thinkstock

Travel guide

When to go
Temperatures and prices soar during summer, and wildlife is less active. Spring and autumn are best.

How to get there
There are regular flights from the UK to Greece direct to the mainland or to major islands such as Rhodes and Crete.

The weather
Greece enjoys a Mediterranean climate, with hot summers tempered by winds on the Aegean. Winter can be wet and cold.

What to take
Sun cream and sturdy footwear are a must. A backpack that can hold a large bottle of water is also a good idea.

What you'll see
Greece is home to some of the most famous architecture and art, but its scenery also has a lot to offer, from deserted coves to underground lakes.



Track bears in the mountains

That Greece is home to about half of Western Europe's entire population of brown bears is one of the country's best-kept secrets. The majority are found in the mountainous Pindos National Park, close to the border with Albania. Considering that males can reach up to 2.5 metres (eight feet) tall, they can be surprisingly difficult to see. This is partly down to their elusive nature, but also the cover provided by this rocky and heavily wooded terrain.

However, if you join a tour with a local expert, you'll quickly learn the telltale signs that indicate bear activity, plus the spots they like to frequent; just be prepared for some early morning starts! If you're lucky, you'll also encounter some of the other creatures that call this wilderness home, including wolves, otters, wildcats and deer.

While in the area, it's worth scheduling a day or two to visit the Arcturos Bear Sanctuary at Nymfaio. This 20-hectare (50-acre) stretch of wild forest has been set aside especially for bears rescued from unfit zoos and circuses. Although still fed and watched over by human caretakers, they are otherwise left to their own devices, spending the rest of their days back in their natural environment.

Volunteer with loggerheads

Greece should be at the top of any herpetologist's to-go list. It hosts a wide variety of reptiles and amphibians, including lizards, snakes, frogs and newts. But for most, there's one reptile that steals the show...

Loggerhead turtles spend most of their lives in the ocean, only venturing on land when it's time to nest. With more beaches than anywhere else in Europe, it's no surprise that the majority of expecting loggerhead mothers head to Greek shores to lay their eggs.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of organisations like Archelon – on Zakynthos and beyond – great progress has been made with loggerhead conservation over the last few decades, and they are now listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN. That said, this success is no reason to rest on our laurels. There's still plenty of work to be done to ensure that the Mediterranean subpopulation continues to thrive, and for the most part that falls to volunteers.

Key responsibilities you may be entrusted with include erecting screens and warning signs around nests, monitoring hatchling activity and taking part in public awareness initiatives. It's a fantastic opportunity to work with like-minded people and know that you're playing a part in ensuring the future of these gentle sea creatures.

Ancient Greece



Acropolis

Greece's most iconic monument, the Acropolis, overlooks Athens. Athena's temple and the Parthenon are the most well-preserved ruins.



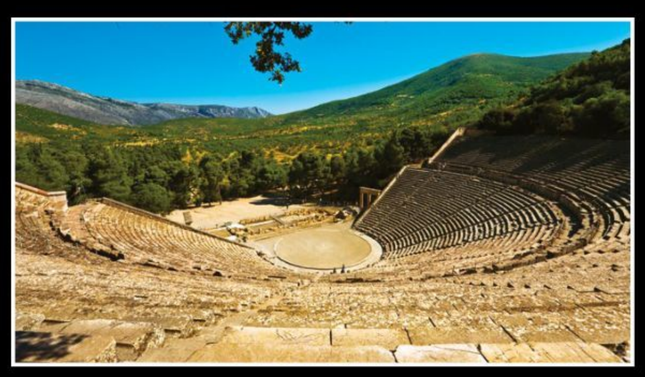
Delphi

Considered the centre of the world by ancient Greeks, this sanctuary, located on Mount Parnassus, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was once home to the famous oracles, the Pythia.



Olympia

Discover where the Olympic Games began. This huge site comprises the remains of temples, baths and, of course, the stadium, where athletes competed.



Epidaurus

One of the most well-preserved theatres of the ancient world still makes a grand impression today. Modern studies have shown the acoustics remain exceptional.



Mycenae

Readers of Homer will know all about the rich and powerful Mycenaean Dynasty (c.1600-1100 BCE). This ancient city was the capital of Greece during this period.

Wing your way to Lesvos

Thanks to its location midway between Africa and Europe, plus a surprisingly diverse range of habitats catering to different needs, the island of Lesvos is a hotspot for migrating birds. During the spring months of April and May, it's not uncommon to see 200-plus species in the space of a week.

Every part of the island offers its own unique birding opportunities. The lower salt pans and estuaries, such as Kalloni Bay, are a magnet for waders like herons, avocets and even flamingos, as well as waterfowl like ducks and swans. Further inland, around the shallow rivers and lakes, you'll find kingfishers, bee-eaters and reed warblers taking advantage of the plentiful bugs and fish.

In the hills, dominated by coniferous forest and olive groves, it's possible to catch a glimpse of woodland-dwellers like woodpeckers, shrikes, goshawks and the super-rare Krüper's nuthatch.

Go where the buffalo roam

Lake Kerkini in northern Greece was created in the 1930s after the construction of a dam, but you'd never think it was made by humans. Even in Europe's most biodiverse country, this body of water (including its surrounding wetlands and meadows) stands out. It's a Mecca for bird-watchers, attracting avifauna as varied as herons, pelicans, eagles, cranes and ibises at various times of the year.

But its most unusual inhabitants – and certainly its largest – are the resident water buffalo. These huge cattle, which can weigh over a ton (2,000 pounds) in extreme cases, were once a common sight in southern Europe, but drastically declined in the late 20th century. A breeding programme is now underway to help boost their numbers. If boating on the lake, keep an eye out for them!

While in the area, be sure to try some of the local delicacies made with buffalo milk, such as the crème-caramel-like *kazandibi*, which means 'clink' in English.

Meet Crete's iconic ungulates

The kri-kri, or Cretan ibex, is a mountain goat found only in Crete. They are distinguished by large horns that curl backwards, a dark collar of fur and their hardy but shy disposition. Once considered a subspecies of wild goat, genetic testing proved that many millennia ago they were actually a domestic breed. Today's biggest population of kri-kri live in Samaria Gorge National Park, a region of epic mountains and chasms.



Look for 101 Dalmatians

Dalmatian pelicans are the largest of their kind and one of the planet's biggest flying birds overall, with wingspans sometimes rivalling those of the albatross! Although several Greek islands are home to small groups of pelicans, to see them en masse you'll need to head to wetland areas on the mainland. The lagoons of Amvrakikos Bay and Lake Kerkini are two of the last strongholds for these magnificent birds, and rich in many other species of avifauna to boot.





Visit the patients at an animal hospital

Few places can match the amount of Greek fauna living at the Hellenic Wildlife Hospital (EKPAZ) on the island of Aegina. Established more than 30 years ago, it was one of the very first sanctuaries of its type in the Mediterranean. Headed up by Giannis Poulopoulos, it remains one of the leading not-for-profit shelters in the region.

More than 4,000 animals in need of care are admitted here each year from all over Greece. Patients vary from wild boars, hedgehogs and goats to iguanas, pelicans and griffon vultures. It's worth noting that this is a working sanctuary, so don't expect a zoo. However, tours are available for €1.

Greek endemic species



Karpathos Lycian salamander

Only found on a few Dodecanese islands, these critters live in pine forests, scrubland and dry-stone walls. The best time to see them is in winter or early spring.



Peloponnese slow worm

Often mistaken for snakes, slow worms are actually legless reptiles belonging to their own family. More slender than its relations, this slow worms' brown body is light on top and darker around the belly.



Cretan spiny mouse

These mice get their name from a coarse patch of hair on their backs and tails. They are tricky to spot in the wild, but some are kept at Crete's Natural History Museum.



Milos viper

This endangered snake is restricted to a handful of islands in the Cyclades Archipelago. If you see one, keep your distance – their venom is very potent.



Cretan water frog

It was only discovered in the 1990s that Crete's frogs were their own species, genetically distinct from those on the mainland.

Lend monk seals a helping flipper

With only around 650 individuals left in the wild, the Mediterranean monk seal is one of the world's rarest pinnipeds. Around two-thirds of the remaining population are found in Greek waters, particularly in the caves and beaches of the Northern Sporades and the Cyclades island groups. You can do your bit for this endangered species by contacting the Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal (aka MOm) should you spot a seal, via their website: mom.gr.

Embark on a spiritual journey

Lepidoptera – the scientific name for butterflies and moths – is derived from the Greek word for 'soul'. In antiquity, people became convinced that these fluttery insects were the spirits of the dead. Whether you believe that or not, there is undoubtedly something ethereal about the Valley of the Butterflies in Petaloudes, Rhodes. Every summer, thousands of tiger moths (okay, technically it should be called the Valley of the Moths) descend here and smother the landscape. They are drawn by the aromatic oriental sweetgum trees and the coolness of the valley. It's a magical place to while away an afternoon, and a pleasant respite from the summer sunshine.

Top tips

It's not *all* Greek...
Greek isn't the easiest of languages to pick up given its unique alphabet. Fortunately for us, the level of spoken English in Greece is generally high, but locals will really appreciate it if you at least learn to say some of the basics.

Watch where you step!
If hiking in the Greek wilderness, be sure to keep a close eye on what's on the ground ahead. Venomous snakes such as adders and vipers are common in the countryside, and can inflict a very nasty bite!

Road safety
Greece has one of the highest annual rates of car accidents in Europe. Take care when on the road, particularly when driving on narrow, winding mountain roads. If cycling, always wear a helmet and be extra vigilant on blind corners.

What to take



Water shoes
Keep your feet protected when exploring sealife-packed rock pools and shallow reefs with a pair of water shoes. Their bumpy soles also provide some traction when traversing slippery rocks.



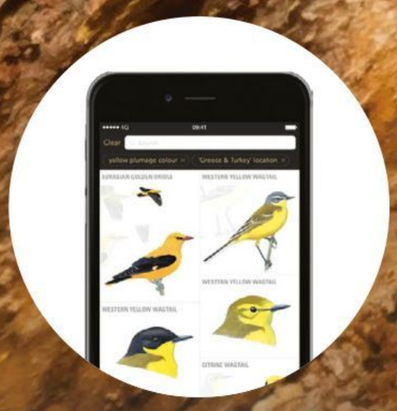
Binoculars
To see nature in all its glory, we often need a little optical assistance. A pair of binoculars will give you great views from afar – ideal for getting a closer look at wild animals without putting yourself at risk.



Hat
Whether on the beach, hiking in the forests or exploring ancient ruins, you need to keep your head protected from the intense Greek sun. Look for a hat with a wide brim to protect both your head and neck.



Lumbar pack
If you don't want to take a bulky backpack on a day trip, a lightweight lumbar pack is a great alternative. Some models have space for water bottles and zipped pockets to keep valuables safe.



Birdwatching app
If you're a keen birder, invest in a dedicated app, The Collins Bird Guide app, for example, contains hundreds of European species, searchable by region, and all with stunning illustrations.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Responsible Travel
RESPONSIBLETRAVEL.COM
Brown Bear Tracking in Northern Greece
Guided by a ranger, search for bears in the Pindos Mountains for five days. From ~£560pp (~$720).

Conservation
Natural Greece
NATURAL-GREECE.GR
Greece Sea Turtle Conservation Holiday
Spend nine days working with sea turtles in the Peloponnese, protecting nesting females and baby turtles. From ~£740pp (~$950).

Luxury
Nature Trek
NATURETREK.CO.UK
Butterflies of Southern Greece
Eight days on Mount Chelmos and Mount Parnassos focusing on Greece's rich insect life. From £1,695pp (~$2,170), flights included.

South Africa

Whether you're spotting the Big Five in the savannah, impressive birds in the grasslands, or whales off the rugged coast, South Africa is a megadiverse country like no other, and teeming with wildlife for you to discover

Words **Amelia Jones**



Travel expert

Senior travel advisor for specialist tour company Africa Travel, Felicity Balcomb was born and bred in South Africa and is very passionate about this diverse country

"South Africa is a country that can be visited all year round and has everything to offer the traveller – beautiful beaches, dramatic landscapes and vibrant cities. But most of all, it is a land rich in wildlife.

The country teems with lions and elephants and herds of antelope, zebra, wildebeest and giraffe. Bird watchers will be captivated by more than 850 different species, and safari-goers may delight in spotting the elusive leopard and the endangered wild dog.

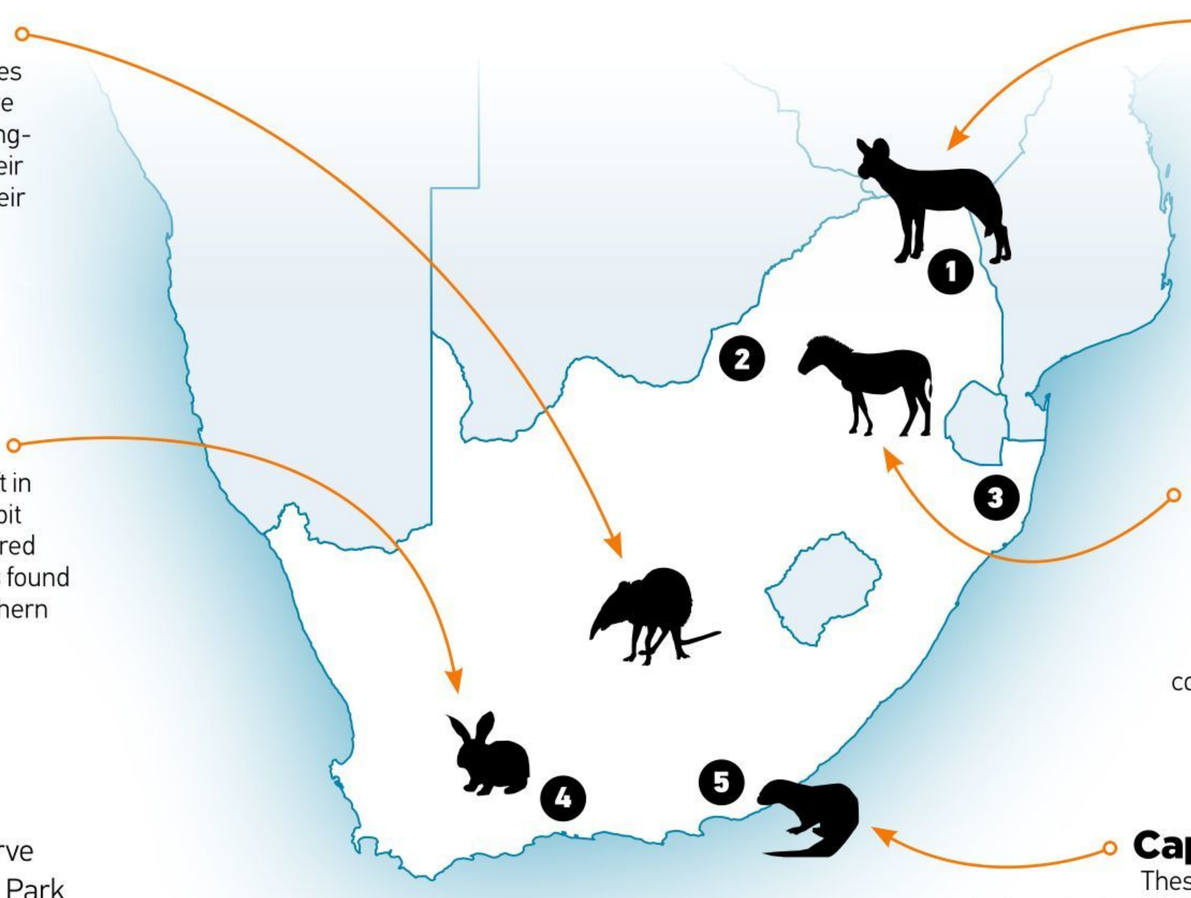
South Africa is also the ideal destination to view great creatures of the deep during the whale-watching season. Here, you can also spot penguins and dive with great white sharks. The wilderness, combined with the lush Garden Route, and the cosmopolitan glamour of Johannesburg and Cape Town, create a diverse land for all seasons and tastes."

Elephant shrew

Reaching up to 29 kilometres (18 miles) per hour, you have to be quick to spot these long-nosed shrews. They use their tongues to flick food into their mouths, and can be found in almost any habitat in South Africa.

Riverine rabbit

With just 250 individuals left in the wild, this nocturnal rabbit is one of the most endangered mammals in the world. It is found only in the central and southern areas of the Karoo Desert.



1 Kruger National Park
2 Madikwe Game Reserve
3 iSimangaliso Wetland Park
4 Garden Route National Park
5 Addo Elephant National Park

Wild dog

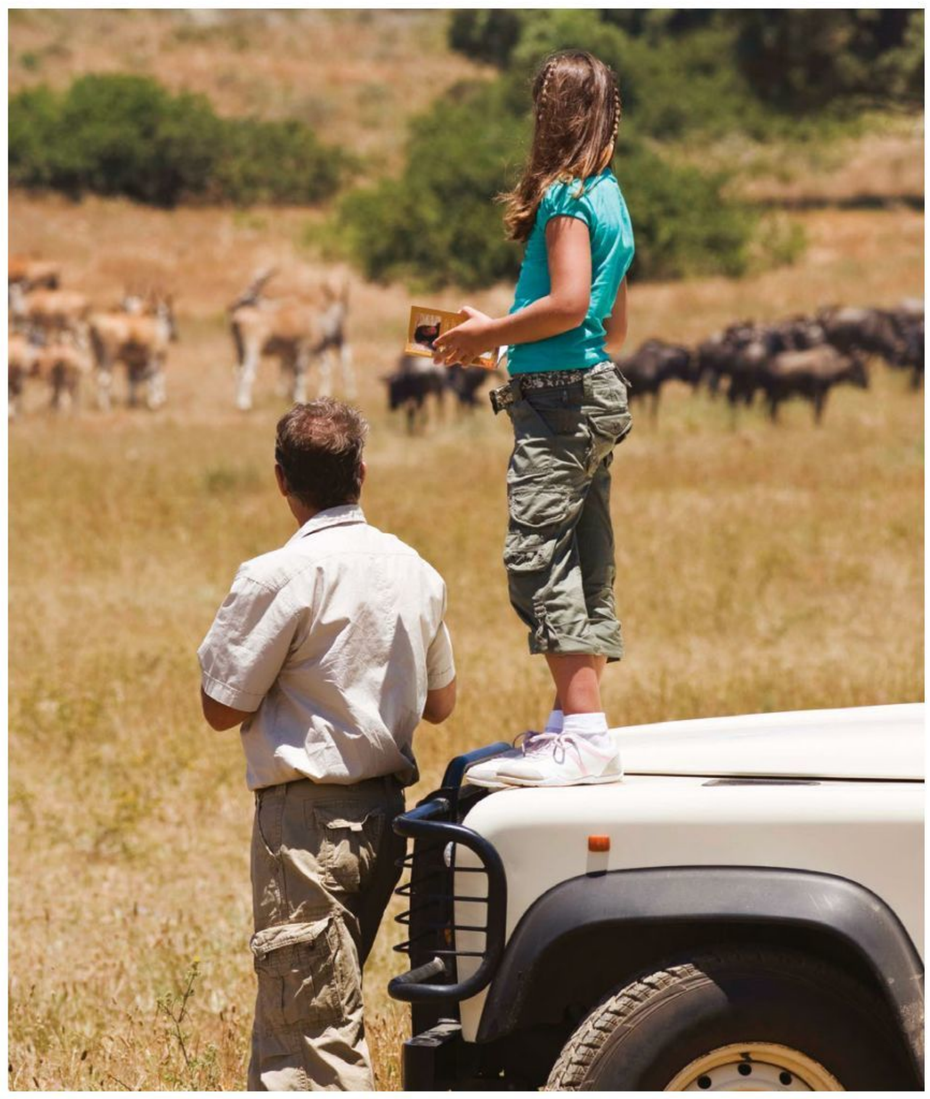
Also known as the Cape hunting dog, these canines are one of Africa's most endangered mammals. Known for their caring family behaviour, their small packs can be found in the Kruger National Park, the Kalahari and the Madikwe Reserve.

Burchell's zebra

The most common zebra species in South Africa, the plains zebra can be found mostly in the south and east. Their stripes are used to confuse predators and to keep cool, due to tiny convection currents between stripes.

Cape clawless otter

These otters have partly webbed, and clawless, feet and are rather clumsy on land. They are found near water in the savannahs and forests, and have even been spotted scavenging for food on the Cape Peninsula beaches.



© Getty Images; Thinkstock

Travel guide

When to go

During the dry winter (May to September), the sparse vegetation makes it easier to spot animals.

How to get there

There are direct flights from the UK to Tambo International Airport and Cape Town International Airport.

The weather

Cape Town and the Western Cape has winter rain and dry summers; other areas have summer storms and dry winters.

What to take

A hat, sun cream and insect repellant are key kit for summer. Winter can be mild though, so bring suitable layers.

What you'll see

With an array of habitats to explore, from deserts and mountains to grasslands and beaches, you are sure to see some of the most diverse animal species on the planet.



Come face to face with an African elephant

The most iconic African animal and the largest of the elephant family, the African elephant is one of the most beautiful sights of the savannah. These incredible animals can be seen in all national parks and reserves across South Africa, but there is nothing quite like having a close encounter with one. African elephants are huge; they are up to four metres (13 feet) tall and weigh around 6.5 tons – half the weight of a double-decker bus! An animal of such heft needs to eat a lot to maintain such a giant body, pushing over trees to get to the juiciest leaves, eating more than 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of food per day.

Elephants are incredibly social and intelligent animals, and are known for their huge tusks and excellent memories. Sadly, their distinctive tusks, which grow for most of their life and indicate age, are the main reason that 8% of elephants are poached. In 1920, there were just 120 individuals left in South Africa, but now more than 10,000 can be found in the Kruger National Park alone, thanks to thriving conservation efforts to reduce poaching and habitat loss. Visit between September and December to spot elephant calves, and take a safari drive or guided walk through one of the many national parks or reserves to get up close to these majestic giants.

Spy on some thirsty rhinos

With over 75% of the world's rhino population living in South Africa, your 'Big Five' checklist wouldn't be complete without these lovable creatures. South Africa has two species of rhino, the Critically Endangered black rhino, and the white rhino. Sadly, poaching is at a critical level in South Africa as even protected areas are not completely safe, despite efforts from the government to combat the issue. However, the white rhino has been brought back from the brink of extinction and now flourishes in the Kruger National Park and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi National Park, and so conservation efforts now turn towards the black rhino.

Hluhluwe-Imfolozi has become a rhino refuge, and was founded specifically to protect the world's remaining population of white rhinos. The Rhino Sanctuary in the park has increased population numbers and led to the relocation of several rhinos to help repopulate other parts of Africa. Here, orphaned rhino calves are also cared for and reared before being introduced back to the wild. To see rhinos in their natural habitat, wallowing in the mud, scratching up against trees and drinking from the water holes, take a guided tour of the park, where you can get a closer look from the many hides overlooking the water holes.

National parks



Sea kayaking

Explore South Africa from the sea. With training, tours and adventure kayaking on offer from most coastal towns, there is something for all ages and abilities.



Paragliding

For the more adventurous, why not try your hand at paragliding. With stunning flight sites and operators across the country, you'll see South Africa in a way few visitors get to.



Wine tasting

Just an hour outside of Cape Town is the largest wine-making region in South Africa, the Cape Vineyards, offering sunset tastings with mountain views.



Table Mountain views

Whether you hike to the top or take a cableway ride, the views from Table Mountain are worth the wait. Be aware that the cableway closes in adverse weather.



Cycling tours

Ditch the car and experience this diverse country on two wheels. Take in the sights and sounds of South Africa and cycle through vineyards, mountains and forests.

Walk among nature's tallest animals

The South African giraffe, or Cape giraffe, can be found foraging in savannahs and woodlands for leaves, flowers, fruits and shoots. Their blotched spots, purplish tongues and intriguing eating habits make these gentle giants a must-see.

Giraffe populations in South Africa are steadily rising, and in 2016 there were around 31,500 individuals in the wild. At a height of 5.5 metres (18 feet), they are the tallest animals in the world, and are even more impressive when seen up close. Their long, muscular necks have developed complex blood circulatory systems, which are still not fully understood. Their necks are used to reach high-up vegetation, where their long prehensile tongues pull the leaves into their mouths and strip branches bare. Their tongues are also used in battle, as males strike and wrestle each other for the right to reproduce.

Giraffes are easy to spot in the Kruger National Park and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, where you can take a self-drive safari, a guided drive, or a bush walk.

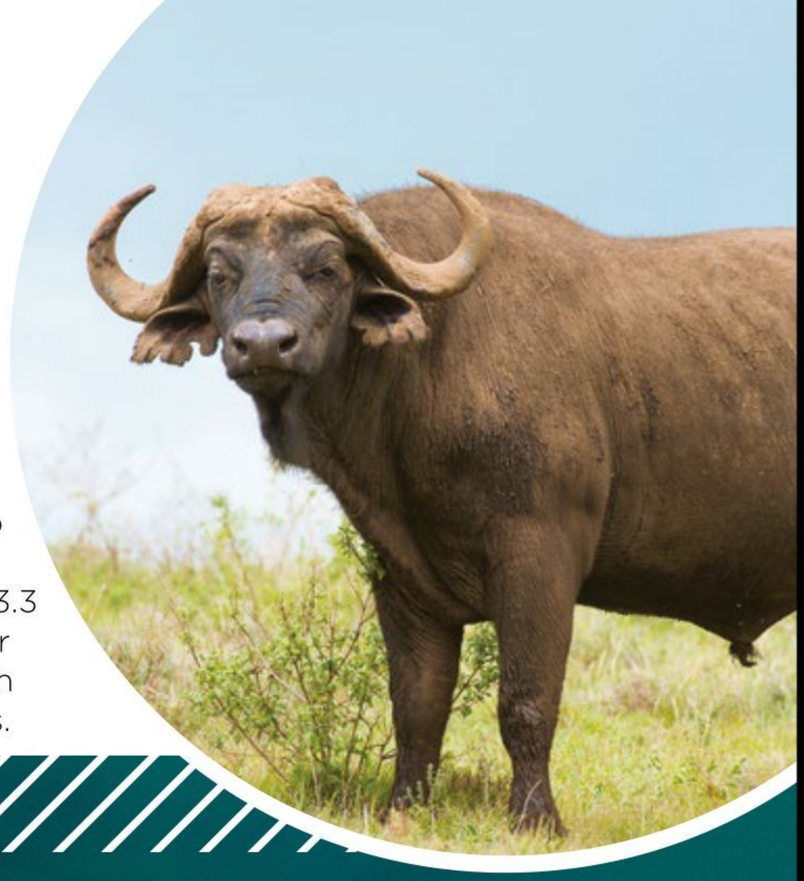
Go on an ocean safari

Whether from land or sea, South Africa offers some of the most spectacular views of marine mammals in the world, with more than 37 species of whale and dolphin visiting the coast annually.

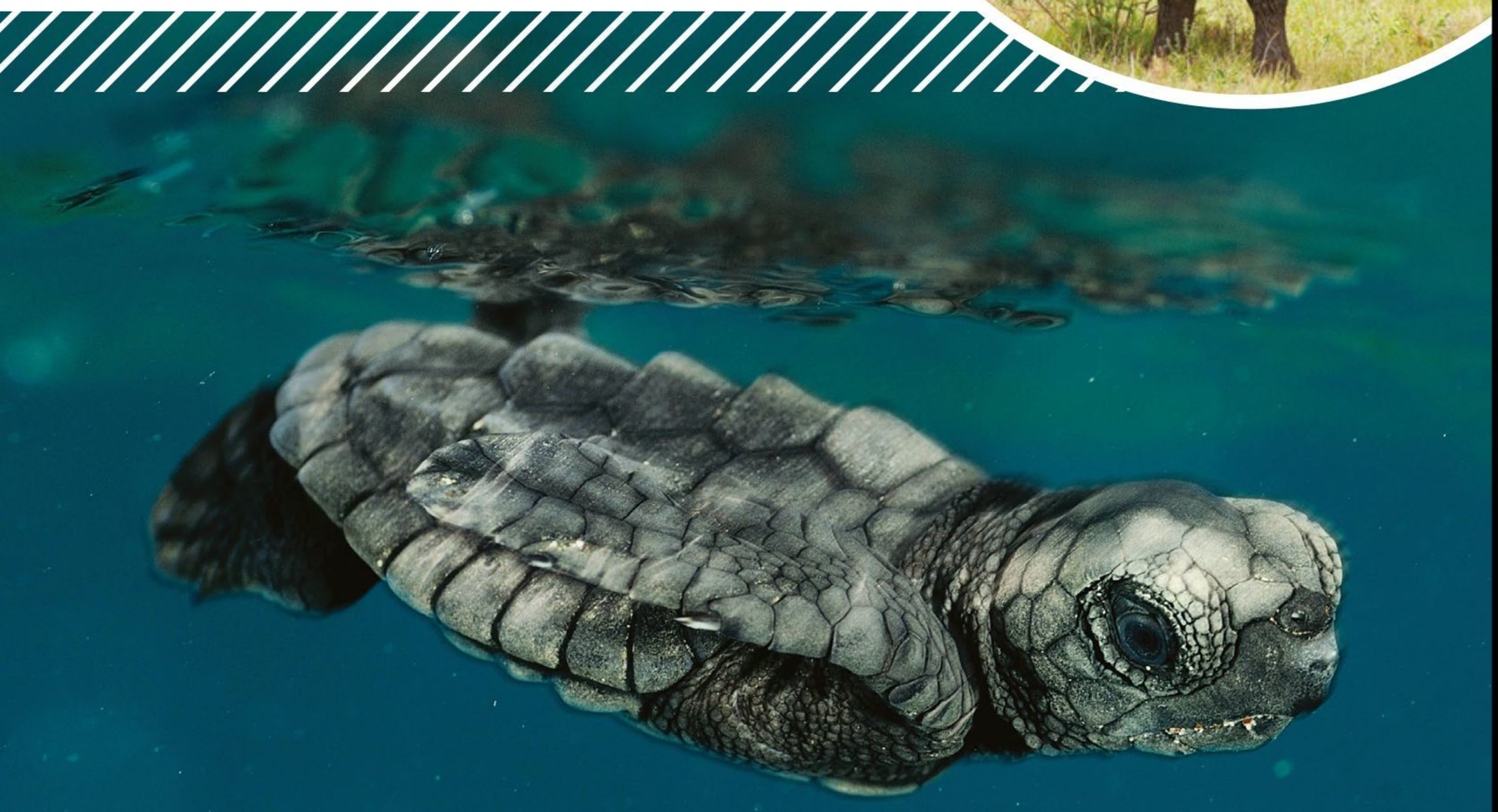
Each year, from June to November, southern right whales visit the 'Whale Coast' on the southwestern Cape as they migrate to warmer waters to mate and rear their calves. The best spots for whale watching are along the cliffs and beaches at the Addo Elephant National Park, Table Mountain National Park, iSimangaliso Wetland Park and the West Coast National Park. But for a closer encounter, many choose to take to the seas.

Marine eco tour company Raggy Charters operates whale, dolphin and penguin tours, as well as ocean safaris in Algoa Bay from Port Elizabeth. Its tours cover nearly 50 kilometres (30 miles) of ocean, and the money generated helps to fund the Baywatch Project and the Penguin Research Fund.

Catch a glimpse of a Cape buffalo



These powerful bovines live in South Africa's floodplains and grasslands. There are 900,000 buffalo in the wild, with more than three-quarters living in protected areas. Their horns can be up to one metre (3.3 feet) apart and have fused bases. Buffalo require water daily, so water holes are prime viewing spots. Stick with your guide, though, as Cape buffalo can be dangerous.



Take a trip with some turtles

While the savannahs may be the biggest attraction, the beaches offer an equally spectacular experience. South Africa has just two species of turtle nesting on its shores: leatherback turtles and loggerhead turtles. They are the focus of a major community conservation effort at their nesting grounds in northern KwaZulu-Natal, and visitors to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park can take a guided tour to see these beautiful creatures as they make their epic first journey from their nests to the ocean.



Spot an elusive leopard

Despite being masters of stealth and disguise, African leopards are threatened by poaching. And while the South African government imposed a year-long ban on hunting leopards in 2016 in a bid to boost their numbers, it's unknown how many remain in the wild. However, The Limpopo Leopard Conservation Project aims to protect them through camera trapping and behaviour documentation.

The best place to see these elusive cats is in Karoo National Park or Kruger National Park, and while sightings are rare, the best time to see them is at night when they hunt. The Londolozi Game Reserve, located within the Greater Kruger National Park, specialises in leopard spotting, and has been recognised for its conservation ethic.

South Africa's birds



Blue crane
Listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN, South Africa's national bird feeds in the dry grasslands of Karoo, only venturing into the wetlands during the nesting season.



Ostrich
The largest living species of bird, the ostrich is native to Africa, and roams the savannahs and deserts. Its powerful legs can cover 5m (16ft) in one stride, and can kill a lion with one kick.



Cape white-eye
These birds are found in savannahs, forests, scrublands and wetlands. They have rounded wings and a striking ring of white feathers around their eyes.



African pygmy kingfisher
These bright birds feed on insects rather than fish. They are found in the Kruger National Park and Mkhuze Reserve between September and December.



Lilac-breasted roller
These colourful birds perch on treetops looking for insects, lizards, scorpions and rodents in the open woodlands and savannahs.

Mingle with a meerkat mob

The meerkat is a member of the mongoose family and lives in the Kalahari Desert in very complex social groups consisting of 20 to 50 members called a mob, gang or clan. Meerkats have long, slender bodies and use their tails for signalling and balancing when standing upright. They eat mostly insects, but also scoff lizards, snakes, spiders and scorpions, and are immune to certain venoms. Meerkats have binocular vision and while foraging for food, one member of the group will stand guard. If they spot danger, they'll bark or whistle to warn others before hiding in their burrows.

For a chance to spot these charismatic creatures in the wild, take a trip to the Kalahari Meerkat Project in the Northern Cape, where 18 groups of wild meerkats are anything but shy. They have been studied here since 1993, and even starred in the BBC's *Life Of Mammals* documentary. Dress appropriately for the time of year though, as temperatures are scorching in the summer and freezing during winter.

Swim with African penguins

When you think of Africa, penguins don't initially come to mind, but this rugged coastline offers some spectacular penguin spotting locations. The African penguin is the only penguin species that breeds in South Africa. Also known as the jackass penguin for its donkey-like bray, these flippered birds are flightless and streamlined for darting and diving through the water. They have developed a special adaptation to cope with the heat, as they use the pink glands above their eyes to help cool down their blood.

Boulders Beach on the Cape Peninsula offers an experience like no other, where visitors can walk, and even swim, with these charismatic and inquisitive birds. From here, you can also get a close-up view of the penguin colony on Foxy Beach, just over the sand dunes, where you can see hundreds of penguins waddling about their daily business.

Safari essentials



Headtorch
Be prepared when night falls by taking a handy headtorch for your safari adventure. Look for a rechargeable model, ideally with battery backup in case of emergencies.



Protective bag
Keep your fragile items, such as cameras and GPS trackers, packed safely in a padded bag. This will keep them protected from any knocks and bumps while on the safari trail.



Sun hat
Perfect for safaris, protect your face and neck from the South African sunshine with a wide sun hat. Some also come infused with insect repellent to keep bugs at bay.



Light hiking boots
Get some light hiking boots for warm-weather hiking. Look for boots with good grip and comfortable padded soles, and made with breathable material to keep your feet dry.



Sunglasses
Don't let glare obstruct your view of the local wildlife. Get a pair with good UV protection, and make sure they are comfortable to wear for long periods of time.

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Who to travel with

Explore
Audley Travel
AUDLEYTRAVEL.COM

Discover South Africa
This 15-day self-drive trip includes whale watching and a Big Five guided safari drive in the Eastern Cape. From £3,695pp (~$4,735), including flights.

Luxury
Africa Travel
AFRICATRAVEL.COM

Wildlife of South Africa
An 11-day tailor-made trip for nature lovers, including the 'Big Five' in Kruger, Cape penguins and more. From £3,695pp (~$4,730), including flights.

Safari
Nature Trek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

South Africa – Kruger (Mammals)
An action-packed, ten-day mammal-watching safari in the Kruger National Park, with the chance to spot more than 40 different species. From £2,895pp ($3,710), including flights.



Madagascar

Madagascar

Earth's fourth largest island is unlike anywhere else on Earth. With an incredible array of endemic species thriving in unique habitats, this amazing 'eighth continent' showcases some of evolution's greatest achievements

Words **Matt Ayres**

Travel expert

Paul Stanbury is operations manager at Naturetrek, a tour operator specialising in wildlife holidays led by expert naturalists

"Madagascar is an enchanting country, home to some of the planet's most unique creatures. It has been isolated from mainland Africa for 165 million years, allowing evolution to take its own unique and often bizarre course. Today over 80% of all life here occurs nowhere else.

A visit here is a must for anyone with a passion for the natural world. At Naturetrek we have been helping people enjoy Madagascar's wildlife for almost 30 years. There are tours to suit all interests, be it the island's birds, reptiles, plants or endearing lemurs.

Explore the rainforests of Andasibe in search of the singing indri and wonderfully camouflaged geckos before discovering the bizarre spiny deserts around Ifaty and the dry forests of Ampijoroa, home to the beautiful Coquerel's sifaka and the elusive fossa."

Madagascan flying fox
Madagascar's largest flying mammal can be found in the Ankarana Reserve, alongside roughly half of the island's other bat species. New bat species are still being discovered in Madagascar.

Ring-tailed lemur
Many tourists will expect to see these icons of Madagascar, although their endangered status poses a challenge. Visit the Tsimanampetsotsa National Park where they live alongside three other lemur species and a huge variety of birds.



Brookesia micra chameleon
Take a hike off the beaten track through Amber Mountain National Park, and marvel at its amazing array of chameleons. The world's tiniest chameleon, Brookesia micra, lives here.

Humpback whale
The island of Nosy Boraha, off Madagascar's east coast, is famous for whale watching. Humpbacks migrate here from the Antarctic to breed and play acrobatic games in the warm waters.

Aye-aye
Madagascar's creepiest looking primate lives in canopies throughout the east coast. Aye-Aye Island in Mananara is one of the most popular places to see them.

1 Ankarana Reserve, Diana
2 Tsimanampetsotsa National Park, Atsimo-Andrefana
3 Nosy Boraha, Analanjirofo
4 Amber Mountain National Park, Diana
5 Mananara, Analanjirofo

© Thinkstock

Travel guide

When to go
September to November is an ideal time to visit Madagascar, with warm temperatures and fewer tourists.

How to get there
Most international flights land in Ivato Airport, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Antananarivo.

The weather
Madagascan winters are often still warm during the day, but cool at night. Avoid cyclone season (January to March).

What to take
Bring some sturdy hiking boots, lots of insect repellant and a camera to snap all the amazing wildlife you'll see.

What you'll see
A diverse range of natural spectacles, many of which are unique to Madagascar. Most of the wildlife found here is endemic, including the charming lemur population.

Experience brilliant birdwatching

With five endemic bird families occurring in Madagascar and its surrounding region, this island nation is teeming with species that you won't find anywhere else on Earth. If you're keen to see these impressive beaked beauties, think about planning your trip around Madagascar's three main climactic zones.

In the country's eastern rainforests, you'll be able to tick off an assortment of unusual birds ranging from floor-dwelling red-breasted couas and scaly ground-rollers to higher-flying helmet vangas and the rare Madagascar serpent eagle. Tropical deciduous forests in the west boast birds including sickle-billed vangas, Madagascan ibises, pygmy kingfishers and Schlegel's asities. Finally, head south to the spiny bush regions for subdesert mesites, littoral rock thrushes and banded kestrels.

If you're pressed for time, a great place to visit is the transition forest of Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park. This special area contains birds from both the western and southern regions, plus a few birds that occur nowhere else on the island, such as the Appert's tetraka. Those determined to see as many birds as possible can also visit Madagascar's endemic wetland species in Bombetoka Bay: uncommon animals like the Humblot's heron and Bernier's teal live here.

Hear indris sing

Until around 350 BCE, gorilla-sized lemurs could be found on Madagascar. While you won't find a lemur that large on the island nowadays, their descendants can still be found hanging out on the upper east coast.

Indris are Madagascar's largest living lemurs, and have a special place in local folklore. One legend describes two brothers living in a forest; while one left his home to cultivate the land and become human, the other remained in the trees and became an indri.

It's not difficult to see why humans can relate to these loveable primates. They are similarly proportioned to us, with long legs and upright bodies, and are the only lemurs without a prominent tail. Indris have even been spotted engaging in human-like 'sun worship', sitting cross-legged with their backs to the trees, soaking up the morning rays.

Another famous anthropomorphic trait is the indris' love of singing. The primates communicate via song up to seven times a day, often coordinating vocal sequences to form duets. Their choruses can be heard from four kilometres (2.5 miles) away.

More than wildlife



Hiragasy performances

An alluring combination of music, dance, theatre and storytelling, these traditional performances date back to the 18th century.



Avenue of the Baobabs

This prominent cluster of 30-metre (98-foot) tall Grandidier's baobab trees grows on either side of the dirt road between Morondava and Belon'i Tsiribihina in west Madagascar.



Tsingy de Bemaraha

The spiky 'forest' of limestone needles in Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park is a bizarre sight. A unique type of erosion created these unusual rock formations.



Nosy Tanikely

This tiny island and marine reserve is famous for its snorkelling. Swim among coral reefs, fish and sea turtles while exploring this miniature paradise.



Rova of Antananarivo

This 17th-century palace looks over the Madagascan capital. Learn about the history of the building while enjoying impressive views from the grounds.

Observe the aye-aye's freakish finger tapping

Malagasy superstition depicts the aye-aye as a demonic symbol of death. While these nocturnal lemurs are undeniably gremlin-like with their piercing yellow eyes, leathery ears and spindly fingers, they certainly don't deserve the evil reputation that they have been given.

Those who make the effort to seek out wild aye-ayes while in Madagascar may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the animals' remarkable hunting strategy. Aye-ayes use their long third fingers to tap rapidly on tree trunks, listening with their large and sensitive ears to echolocate juicy bugs in hollow chambers. When a meal has been found, the aye-aye uses its perpetually-growing teeth to gnaw into the tree, before hooking out the wriggling prey with its specialised fourth finger.

Aye-ayes begin foraging half an hour before sunset, so this is an ideal time to scope them out in the eastern forests they call home.

Admire crazily coloured chameleons

Around half of the world's chameleon species live in Madagascar, making it a fascinating destination for lizard lovers. Although they're famous for their ability to change colour, there's more to these reptiles than rainbow-hued party tricks. The chameleon's eyes move independently of one another and their tails can be used as a fifth limb to grasp branches while climbing. Some species have extensile tongues that are longer than their bodies!

Chameleons are generally divided into two groups: Chamaeleoninae (typical chameleons) and Brookesiinae (dwarf chameleons). Madagascar has examples of both, from the large and vibrant Parson's chameleon to the minuscule Brookesia micra, a brown dwarf chameleon that's small enough to stand on the head of a matchstick.

Colours can vary depending on the location of the lizard. For instance, while panther chameleons in the northeast of Madagascar are usually red, green and orange, members of the same species on the Madagascan island of Nosy Be are bright blue.

Spot breaching humpback whales

You're not the only one searching for paradise in Madagascar – humpback whales migrate here from the Antarctic between July and September to breed. See them breaching out of the water to impress potential mates in hotspots like Nosy Boraha (also known as Île Sainte Marie), Antongil Bay and Fort Dauphin.



Witness the whimsical dance of the sifaka

Sifakas usually live in trees, but seeing these large lemurs 'dance' along the ground as they hop around on two legs is one of Madagascar's most memorable sights. Some, like the Coquerel's sifaka, prefer the dry deciduous forests in western Madagascar, while others, like the diademed sifaka, live in the island's humid eastern rainforests.



Track the elusive fossa

With so many charismatic lemurs leaping about, it's easy to miss the notorious hunter who preys on them. Fossas are the largest carnivorous mammals found in Madagascar, and the closest thing the island has to a big cat. However, they are actually more closely related to mongooses than felines.

Retractable claws and sharp cat-like teeth help the fossa to take down its prey, while its long tail is used as a counterweight to stay balanced while prowling through the trees.

Fossas aren't picky about when they hunt, so you're just as likely to encounter them at night as you are during the day. That's if you're stealthy enough; with amazing agility and skilful climbing abilities, it can be tricky to spot these elusive creatures in the rainforest. Team up with an expert tour guide for your best chance of seeing one.

Unique to the island



Lowland streaked tenrec
These small, stripy mammals communicate by rubbing their spines together and producing high-pitched sounds, in a similar way to grasshoppers' legs.



Mouse lemur
Famous for being the smallest primates in the world, pygmy mouse lemurs are aptly named. Eagle-eyed wildlife spotters will find them in the trees of Madagascar's western dry forests.



Geckos
A wide variety of these chirping lizards are endemic to Madagascar, from neon-coloured day geckos to expertly camouflaged nocturnal ones.



Malagasy civet
These rare rainforest carnivores can be found in eastern and northern Madagascar. They are related to other Madagascan predators like fossas and falanoucs.



Tomato frog
Tomato frogs aren't as edible as their name suggests: predators who try to nibble get a face full of toxic slime, secreted by the amphibians as a defence mechanism.

Swim with sea turtles

Snorkelling among the amazing array of fish that inhabit the Indian Ocean's coral reefs is unforgettable in itself, but sharing the water with a sea turtle makes the experience even more special. Loggerheads, leatherbacks, hawksbills, olive ridleys and green turtles can all be spotted along the western coast, and the stunning island reserve of Nosy Tanikely provides an excellent opportunity to swim with the ancient reptiles. Get there by boat from Nosy Be, a larger island off Madagascar's northwestern coast.

Ramble beside ring-tailed lemurs

When most people think of lemurs, it's these distinctive-looking primates that come to mind. Ring-tailed lemurs are easily recognised thanks to the long black and white tail that gives them their name, although seeing them in the wild can be tricky – populations are patchy throughout their range in southern Madagascar. Luckily, ring-tailed lemurs spend a good portion of their time on the ground, so you needn't strain your neck while searching for them.

Top tips

Medication
You'll need anti-malarial medication in Madagascar, as well as protection against diseases such as typhoid, tetanus and rabies. Get any necessary vaccinations well in advance to avoid pre-trip stress.

Local currency
Madagascar uses the Malagasy Ariary as currency. This officially replaced the Malagasy franc in 2005, although prices may still be shown in francs in some more rural areas.

Visa
Every visitor to Madagascar needs a visa, a return ticket and a passport valid for six months after the day of arrival.

Must-have items



Hiking boots
From sandy deserts to humid rainforests, you'll need a good pair of supportive hiking boots to trek through Madagascar's diverse terrain.



Waterproof jacket
If you plan on visiting Madagascar's soggy eastern rainforests, a lightweight waterproof layer will protect against showers and insect bites.



Headtorch
Some of Madagascar's most amazing animals are only active at night. Bring a headtorch to keep your hands free for nocturnal photo opportunities.



Bridge camera
Bulky DSLRs may be a burden on long wildlife treks. Smaller bridge cameras are lighter and still capable of taking impressive shots.



Wildlife guide
Get clued up on Madagascar's amazing array of animals before you go, and top up your knowledge between wildlife spotting stops.

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Who to travel with

Budget
African Budget Safaris
AFRICANBUDGETSAFARIS.COM

Northern Madagascar Tour
Spend eight days exploring Madagascar's flora and fauna. From £1,570pp (~$2,010).

Family
Reef and Rainforest Tours
REEFANDRAINFOREST.CO.UK

Family Friendly Fun in Madagascar
A 14-day tour of Madagascar's wildlife. From £3,300pp (~$4,230) including flights.

Luxury
Naturetrek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

Madagascar's Lemurs
16 days in search of the island's many lemurs. From £4,495pp (~$5,760), including flights.

Mauritius

Mauritius may be best known as the final resting place of the dodo, but this tropical island is starting to get a new reputation as one of the leading lights of conservation

Words **Adam Millward**



Travel expert

Dr Vikash Tatayah is the conservation director of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. He manages a number of programmes that have helped wildlife to recover

"Mauritius is among the most isolated islands in the world. Plants and animals arrived naturally from the Afro-Malagasy region, Australasia and Asia, with a high proportion becoming endemic.

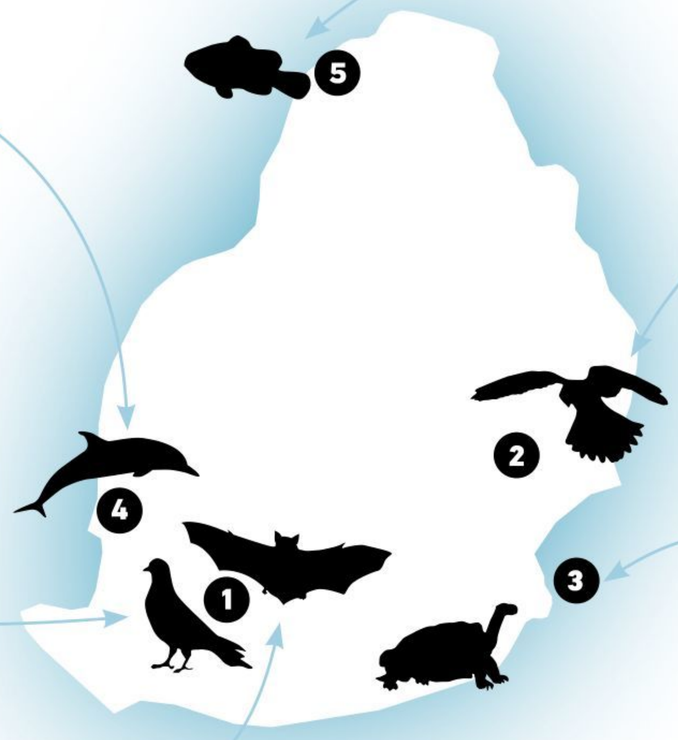
Despite high levels of extinction following the arrival of man to an uninhabited Mauritius, the island is home to an amazing endemic fauna and flora with a dozen different native forest types. One can see Round Island bottle palms, ebonies and various hardwoods, Mauritius kestrels, pink pigeons, echo parakeets, Mauritius fodies, olive white-eyes, cuckoo-shrikes, Telfair's skinks and surrogate giant tortoises by visiting Ile aux Aigrettes, Ferney Valley and the Black River Gorges National Park. Mauritius has led the rescue of plants and animals that would have joined the dodo, bringing a number of species back from the verge of extinction."

Spinner dolphin

You can get up close to these marine acrobats in their natural environment and also go whale watching off the west coast of the island.

Pink pigeon

It might seem counterintuitive travelling halfway around the world to see a pigeon, but this isn't your average urban cooer. In 1986, there were just 12 wild individuals left, but they refused to go the way of their unlucky relative the dodo and continue to recover.



1 Black River Gorges National Park
2 Bambous Mountains
3 Ile aux Aigrettes
4 Tamarin Bay
5 Trou-aux-Biches

Fruit bat

The only mammals native to the Mascarene Islands (consisting of Mauritius, Rodrigues and Réunion) are these charismatic flying foxes.

Clownfish

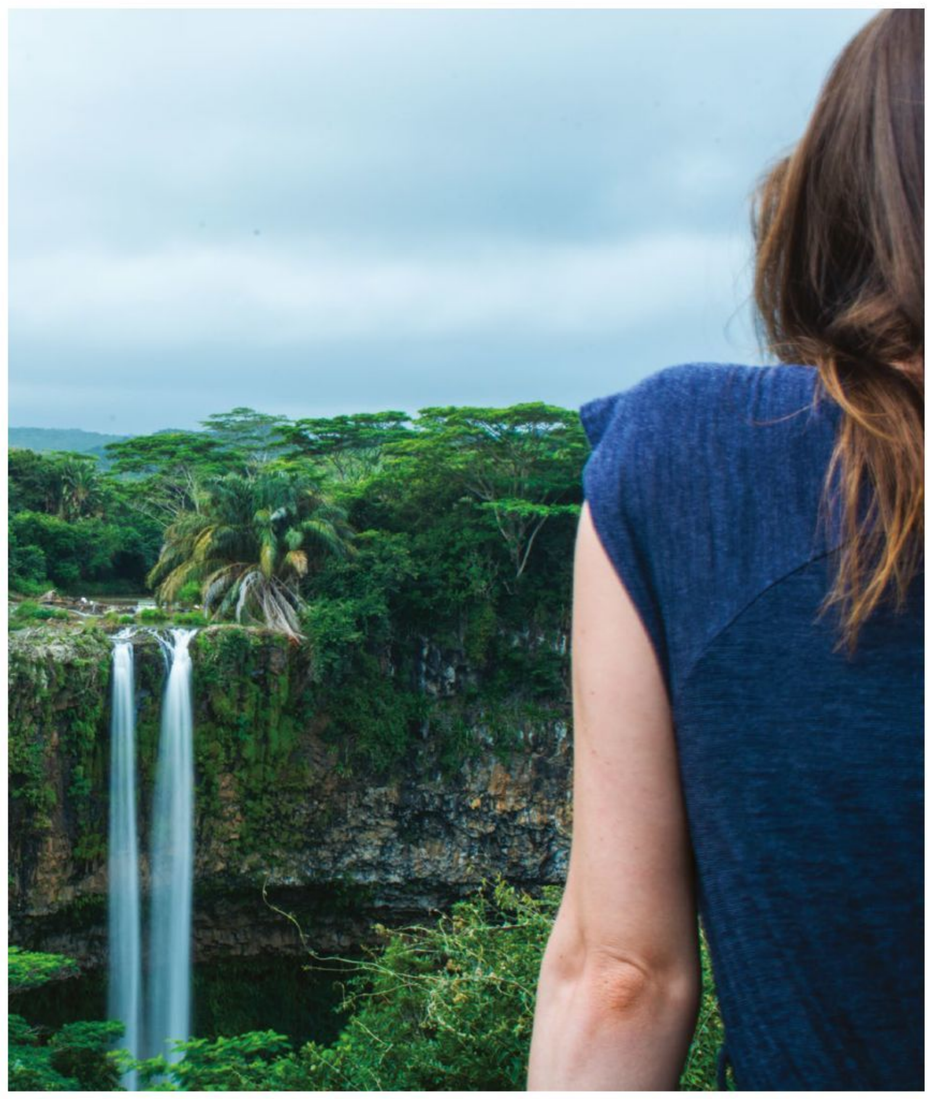
Find Nemo, Dory and a whole lot more when you descend beneath the waves in a submarine, the only such leisure sub in the entire Indian Ocean.

Mauritius kestrel

Another resident that has made a remarkable recovery is the island's only remaining bird of prey. Once classified as the rarest bird in the world, this raptor is on many a birdwatcher's bucket list.

Aldabra tortoise

Although Mauritius' own native giant tortoises were driven to extinction in the 19th century, a successful rewilding programme with these Seychelles natives has seen great success in recent years.



Travel guide

When to go

The off-peak cooler months (July to September) are more comfortable for exploring the island.

How to get there

Limited direct flights are available from the UK to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport.

The weather

Mauritius has a tropical climate, so expect sun and intense rain showers year-round. January to February is peak cyclone season.

What to take

Take light clothing. Pack something smart for the evenings, as many hotels and restaurants request formal wear.

What you'll see

Mauritius is a lot more than sandy beaches and turquoise seas. Visit its wild forests, geological sites and bustling capital.

Watch the bats rise as the sun sets

Even in a tiny country famed for its biodiversity and high number of endemic animals, the Mauritian fruit bat stands out. It's the sole surviving native mammal found on the island. These mega bats, also known as flying foxes, have wingspans of up to 0.8 metres (2.6 feet), and their ginger-coloured furry heads lend them their fox-like appearance.

Fruit bats play a vital role in pollinating and dispersing the seeds of some of Mauritius' most endangered plants. Although they can be spotted in forested areas all over the island in the evenings, one of the most impressive displays takes place at sundown in Black River Gorges National Park. You can easily spend a day hiking in the country's only national park, and it's a hotspot for many of Mauritius' rarest birds, including pink pigeons, olive white-eyes and echo parakeets. As the light begins to fade, thousands of bats fly up en masse from the caves and ravines where they rest during the day. Be sure to keep a close eye on the time, though, as the gates shut in the evenings – or you might want to consider stopping the night at the campsite next to the Black River Visitor's Centre.

See Darwin's plan in action

Sadly, just like the dodo, the many native tortoises that once called Mauritius home were wiped out by the arrival of European settlers. This was not just a loss for chelonian-kind. It also left a huge gap in the regional ecology, as the turtles were the principal grazers, keeping wild plants in check and spreading seeds, like those of the ebony tree. It was history's most famous naturalist, Charles Darwin, who suggested that a similar species might be introduced to take their place. Enter the Aldabra giant tortoise, the last of their kind in the Indian Ocean.

In 2000, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF) released 20 of these gentle giants – originally from the Seychelles – on the Ile aux Aigrettes nature reserve off the southeastern coast. The focus of a long-term conservation project, this 26-hectare (64-acre) islet contains the only remnants of Mauritius' once prolific dry coastal forest, providing a refuge for many animals long since driven off the mainland. The initiative has proven so successful that more than 100 tortoises have now been translocated to another island to build up a second population. The MWF leads walking tours on Ile aux Aigrettes, so as well as meeting the shelled stars, you'll also have an expert at hand to explain exactly how rewilding works.

Beyond the beach



Explore Port Louis

Set around a busy harbour, the Mauritian capital is a melting pot of cultures. You'll find colourful temples, markets and museums, and don't miss the Pamplemousse Gardens.



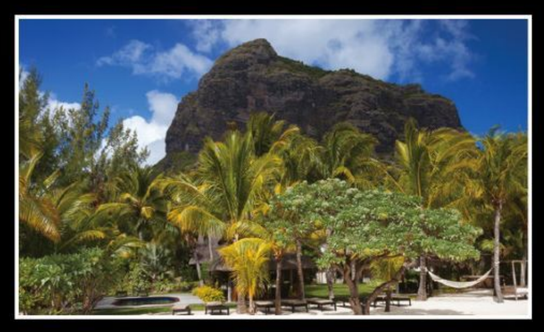
Get active

Mauritius offers many outdoor activities, from kayaking to caving. But top of the list must be abseiling down a 95m (310ft) cliff beside Chamarel Falls, Mauritius' highest waterfall.



Listen to some sega

Typically sung in Créole (the native tongue), sega is one of the most popular musical genres in Mauritius. Variants of it include seggae – a cross between sega and reggae.



Climb Le Morne

If you're feeling energetic, why not tackle the 556m (1,824ft) Le Morne Brabant? This UNESCO World Heritage Site is home to several rare plants and offers amazing views.



Enjoy a very sweet history lesson

Discover the huge role sugar has played in shaping Mauritius at the Beau Plan sugar mill. Sweet souvenirs include Mauritian rum!

Go island-hopping to see rare reptiles

In relation to land area, the Mascarene island group once claimed more endemic reptiles than anywhere else on Earth. Although some of these have now been lost forever, others managed to cling on in isolated communities on offshore islets. These mini ecosystems – the last remaining pockets of a pre-colonisation era – formed the foundation for a long-term project to restore Mauritius' reptiles.

After decades of groundwork, replanting native plants and trying to manage invasive species like shrews and land snails, small groups of endangered lizards have been moved to neighbouring islands to increase their range and odds of survival.

Some of these island nature reserves are closed to the public to avoid jeopardising the rewilding process, but others are accessible. The aforementioned Ile aux Aigrettes is home to new populations of Telfair's skinks and Guenther's geckos – one of the world's biggest gecko species – as well as the colourful ornate day gecko. Ile aux Fouquets now supports a healthy community of Ilot Vacoas skinks, while Gabriel Island has a small number of orange-tailed skinks, but you will need permission before you can visit the island.

Meet the ultimate comeback kid

It's terrifying to think how close the Mauritius kestrel came to extinction. A deadly cocktail of forest destruction, introduced species raiding their nests, and harmful pesticides used in agriculture reduced the population to just two mating pairs by the 1970s. A huge conservation initiative, including monitoring of wild birds, captive breeding and the installation of pest-proof nest boxes, has reversed their fortunes. Although they are no longer Critically Endangered, with an estimated 400-500 kestrels island-wide, these rare raptors are not completely out of the woods yet; there have been worrying declines in some areas in recent years.

To see Mauritius' last endemic birds of prey, your best bet is to spend some time hiking in the Bambous Mountains nature park on the southeast coast of the island. There are sometimes feeding sessions at a visitors' centre in the Vallée de Ferney, where a few wild kestrels have learned that they can pick up a free lunch!

Learn about the dodo's demise...



Today, dodos have acquired almost legendary status. But what was this flightless bird really like? And just how did this Mauritian native – now synonymous with extinction – meet its maker? You can find the answers to these questions and more at the Mauritius Institute (aka the Dodo Museum) in Port Louis, where an exhibit including skeletons, models and artist impressions will help shine a light on this ill-fated fowl.

...then meet the dodo's closest living relative

In the 1980s, pink pigeons came very close to extinction. Luckily for them, their fate was not to be the same as their doomed dodo relations. Thanks to a huge conservation drive, the perilously low population of 12 birds in 1986 is now estimated to have grown to almost 500. One of the best places to see them is the Macchabee Trail, which starts at the Pétrin Visitors' Centre in the Black River Gorges National Park.



Explore a reef without getting wet

Diving and snorkelling aren't for everyone, but that doesn't mean you have to miss out on all the amazing marine life Mauritius has to offer. Near Grand Baie in the north, you can book a place on a submarine or even hire your very own 'subscooter' to go on an underwater adventure. The larger ten-seater sub passes through several coral banks and also tours the Star Hope, a shipwreck that has become a haven for marine life since it sank in 1988. Indian Ocean residents you might encounter on your marine odyssey include clownfish, trevally, rays, eels, crabs, lionfish, swordfish and even turtles.

More Mauritian avifauna



Mauritius fody

Distinguished by the males' bright red head during the breeding season, these charismatic little birds have staged an impressive comeback.



Olive white-eye

Following the same recovery programme that has seen great results with the fody, it's hoped that this critically endangered green songbird with its distinctive white 'spectacles' can also be brought back from the brink.



Red-tailed tropicbird

Tropicbirds are being translocated from larger populations to new areas of Mauritius to encourage the development of new seabird colonies.



Mauritius bulbul

Mauritius boasts its very own species of bulbul, a songbird similar in size to blackbirds. Their plumage is fairly dull, but they have orange-pink beaks and legs.



Mauritius cuckoo-shrike

Another endemic species that has benefitted from a push to preserve native forests. Listen out for short whistles followed by a string of sharper staccato notes.

Dive with dolphins

Off the west coast lies Tamarin Bay, where it's possible to see both spinner dolphins – famed for their playful, acrobatic displays – and their larger bottlenose cousins. Take pictures from the boat or, for an even more memorable experience, take the plunge to become an honorary member of the pod for a short while. There are also trips that head further out in search of larger cetaceans. Sperm whales are found in Mauritian waters year-round, while humpbacks pass through between July and September during their migration.

Listen out for echoes

Once dubbed the world's rarest parrot, echo parakeets are another shining example of what can be achieved when governments and conservationists work together. The population has multiplied approximately 30-fold since the 1980s, when numbers in the wild had dwindled to around 20. That said, they are still endangered and only found in one place: Black River Gorges National Park. Their green plumage can make the parakeets tricky to spot in the forest, so be sure to spend some time at one of the parrot-friendly feeding stations set up by the MWF.

Top tips

Gone but not forgotten
While enjoying the wide variety of fauna on Ile aux Aigrettes, keep an eye out for the bronze statues that pay tribute to Mascarene species no longer around today. It'll make you appreciate the animals that do remain even more.

Visit mini Mauritius
About an hour's flight east of Mauritius is the small volcanic island of Rodrigues. Part of the Mascarene archipelago, it too boasts creatures found nowhere else on the planet, including its very own species of warbler, fruit bat and fody.

Learn the lingo
Mauritius is a multilingual society, with Mauritian Créole being the main language spoken by the locals. However, English and French are also widely used, particularly in tourist areas, so it's worth brushing up on your Français before you go.

Key kit



Sturdy sandals
For adventurers looking for something more durable than a pair of basic flip-flops, adjustable sandals are ideal. Look for a pair with thick rubber soles, with straps you can alter for maximum comfort and support.



Action camera
Capture nature on the go like never before with a wearable camera, such as a GoPro, to record high-definition footage of your trip. Some models are waterproof so can be used while snorkelling or swimming without a case.



Beach towel
A good beach towel is always handy, so look for one that is light, compact and quick to dry. A large towel can also be used as a picnic blanket, tablecloth, casual beachwear or even as a makeshift bag.



Binoculars
A lot of Mauritian wildlife is on the small side and well camouflaged, so it makes sense to take along some optical assistance. Look for a pair that work well in all light, so you can spot wildlife during the day as well as at dawn and dusk.



Solar charger
Mauritius is blessed with eight-plus hours of bright sunshine most days, and you can take advantage of that with a solar charger. Charge it up and use it to power your smartphones, cameras, torches and other gadgets.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Mauritian Wildlife Foundation

MAURITIAN-WILDLIFE.ORG

Ile aux Aigrettes Ecotour
This two-hour tour offers the chance to see some of the island's rarest animals and plants. Trips cost ~£16pp (~$22).

Beach retreat
Steppes Travel

STEPPESTRAVEL.COM

Reunion and Mauritius – Self-Drive and Beach
A 15-day trip including a stay at the 20 Degrees Sud boutique hotel, just a short drive from the departure point for the reef tours. From £2,700pp (~$3,450).

Safari combo
Rainbow Tours

RAINBOWTOURS.CO.UK

Kenya Safari & Mauritius Escape
This 13-day trip starts in Kenya's Maasai Mara viewing traditional game before heading to Mauritius. From £3,950pp (~$5,050), including flights.



China

With landscapes varying from deserts to mountain plateaux and bamboo forests, the world's most populous country is home to a surprisingly diverse population of wildlife

Words **Adam Millward**



Travel expert

Melissa Scott spent 12 years as an expedition leader for Natural Habitat Adventures, and now works as an independent travel guide for destinations across the world

"China represents an incredible diversity of habitats – from oceanic ecosystems to the top of the tallest mountains on Earth. We are fortunate to visit a small but important biome in Sichuan Province that plays host to some of the few remaining giant panda populations to be found.

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government began setting aside areas to protect the quickly vanishing temperate broadleaf and mixed bamboo forests necessary for survival of the endangered panda. In doing so, they also helped a variety of other dwindling wildlife populations rebound. Visitors to these areas have the opportunity to see Tibetan takin, Tibetan and rhesus macaques, tufted deer, Reeve's muntjac, long-tailed goral, Chinese serow, golden snub-nosed monkeys, and bird life including the magnificent golden pheasant."

Black-necked crane
During the summer, these sacred birds can be found on the 'Roof of the World', aka the Tibetan Plateau, which has an average altitude of 4,500 metres (14,760 feet).

Giant panda
One of the most famous endangered animals in the world, some 1,800 of these bears are thought to remain – mainly in the Qinling and Minshan mountain ranges. Wild sightings are very rare, so dedicated sanctuaries around Chengdu are the best option.

1 Panda Base, Chengdu
2 Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve, Yunnan
3 Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, Hunan
4 Sanjiangyuan Natural Reserve, Qinghai
5 Tian-e-Zhou Natural Reserve, Hubei
6 Mingsha Shan, Jiuquan

Bactrian camel
You can take a bumpy ride through 'singing' sand dunes on the fringes of the Gobi Desert, courtesy of these charismatic beasts.

Yangtze finless porpoise
Endemic to the Yangtze River, this is one of the rarest cetaceans on the planet. Conservation efforts are underway to stop it going the same way as its larger cousin, the Yangtze river dolphin.

Asian elephant
These slightly smaller cousins of the African elephant have a small but growing population in the dense tropical forest near the borders of Laos and Myanmar.

Giant salamander
The world's largest amphibian can be seen in streams and rivers in China's central highlands. There are thought to be fewer than 50,000 left.

Travel guide

When to go
The best time to visit is spring or autumn. Seasons vary across regions, so check your destination's specific climate.

How to get there
Direct flights from London to Beijing are frequent, but you'll most likely need to make at least one onward domestic flight.

The weather
The climate can vary wildly. Expect heavy showers, high humidity and storms in the summer (May to August).

What to take
Pack lots of light layers and a decent jacket that's water- and wind-proof. You'll also want a sturdy pair of hiking shoes.

What you'll see
You need to be realistic about your chances of seeing wild pandas, but breathtaking landscapes are guaranteed.

Go in search of a 'river goddess'

The chances of seeing a river dolphin, also called baiji, are about as slim as they come. Although still listed as critically endangered by the IUCN, sightings have been so few in the last two decades that many scientists are convinced that the baiji is functionally extinct. Once venerated as the 'goddess of the river', in the 20th century, a combination of pollution, indiscriminate fishing methods and increased river traffic all took their toll. But just because the odds are against it, it doesn't mean there's any harm in keeping an eye out... after all, it's not every day that you get the chance to potentially rediscover a species.

Cetacean lovers shouldn't despair though, as Yangtze finless porpoises are still found in the river, as well as its tributaries and offshoot lakes. Known for their cheeky smiles and keen intelligence, spotting these gentle creatures can be tricky owing to the absent dorsal fin. One of your best bets for a sighting is to head to a protected area such as Tian-e-Zhou Oxbow Nature Reserve in Hubei Province – home to about 60 porpoises.



Hang out with pandas

Let's face it, for any wildlife lover venturing to China, these furry black-and-white conservation superstars are probably going to be at the top of your must-see list. The city of Chengdu is known as the panda capital of the world, so this should be your first stop. Near here, you'll find Panda Base, a research and breeding research centre set up in 1987 that is at the cutting edge of panda breeding and rehabilitation. The park comprises a range of microhabitats that occur in the bears' native setting, including bamboo forest, streams and caves, enabling visitors to observe the animals engaging with their natural environment. The park also includes to two enclosures for red pandas.

If you'd rather try your luck at seeing pandas in the wild, your best bet is to sign up for an organised tour to the Qinling or Minshan Mountains (there are several operators in Chengdu and Xi'an). November is the best month to visit as the early snows help to reveal tracks. However, the odds of a sighting are extremely low. It's worth factoring in a stop at a reserve too to make sure you don't go home disappointed.

Another option is to volunteer for a day at a centre like Dujiangyan, during which you'll get the opportunity to assist keepers with feeding and cleaning duties, as well as observe the pandas' behaviour up close.

Heritage Sites



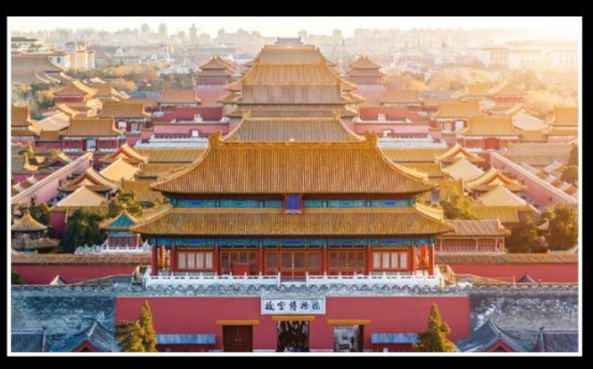
Great Wall

This wonder of engineering was started in the 3rd century BCE and was being extended right up to the 17th century CE. It stretches more than 20,000 kilometres (12,400 miles) and includes towers, garrisons and fortifications.



Mausoleum of Qinshihuang

The impressive tomb of the first Qin Emperor holds thousands of life-size clay figures, known as the Terracotta Army.



The Forbidden City

This complex of ornate buildings and tranquil gardens at the centre of Beijing – formally known as the Imperial Palaces – was the heart of Chinese power for more than 500 years.



Historic Centre of Macao

The former Portuguese colony is a fusion of cultures. Western-inspired architecture, such as the fortress and China's first lighthouse, number among its many charming buildings.



Longmen Grottoes

A warren of man-made caves carved into the karst rock near the ancient capital of Luoyang plays host to 100,000-plus Buddhist statues and etchings.

Peek at a pika

If there were an award for the cutest animal in China, it's hard to imagine the pika not being among the nominees. But cuteness aside, these fluffy relations of rabbits play a crucial role in their habitat. They are the major food source for all the predators on the largely barren Tibetan Plateau, from brown bears to Tibetan foxes. What's more, their burrows provide essential shelter for smaller critters like snow-finches to escape the cold.

Watch wild elephants make a splash

Although it's still early days, China's largest land animals are a welcome success story, with their numbers on the rise thanks to a government drive to protect them. However, there's a long way to go, with only about 250 individuals restricted to a few pockets in the far south of the country.

At Xishuangbanna National Park, book a night or two in the treetop hotel here. This accommodation gives you a front-row seat to the 70-plus wild Asian elephants who come to the valley stream to bathe, drink and play.

Out-of-the-blue monkey business



Golden snub-nosed monkeys certainly stand out, but they can actually be quite hard to find – not merely because of their endangered status, but also because they spend much of their lives in the treetops. They share their mountain forest home in central China with species, including goat-like takin, muntjac deer and flying squirrels.

Listen for a living fossil

Giant salamanders are the largest amphibians on the planet with the biggest specimens reaching up to 1.8 metres (six feet) in length. Their ancestors date back to the time of the dinosaurs, but recent decades have seen their numbers plummet by as much as 80%, owing to their continued capture for both food and medicine.

One of their last remaining strongholds is Zhangjiajie National Park where you may be lucky enough to spot one in the reserve's pools and shallow streams. They are well camouflaged, so you'll want to listen out for their call, which is said to sound like a child's cry.





Meet some colourful feathered friends

Thanks to its position straddling the edges of the Tibetan Plateau and the temperate forest, Wolong Nature Reserve provides a unique habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including some 300 types of bird. Many species of laughingthrush, parrotbill and firethroat call this region of Sichuan home. Some of the most striking residents are from the pheasant family, including the Temminck's tragopan, Chinese monal and golden pheasant. If you're lucky, you might witness the tragopan's unusual courtship display, which involves the male making itself as tall as possible, raising two fleshy horns on its head and showing off its vibrant blue wattle.

Predators of the Tibetan Plateau



Pallas's cat

This fluffy wildcat has evolved very dense fur to withstand the bitter temperatures of the plateau. It typically rests during the day and hunts around dusk.



Tibetan sand fox

Living up to their wily nature, these high-altitude foxes have been recorded striking up an alliance with bears when hunting pika, though it's hard to see what the bear is getting out of the deal!



Tibetan blue bear

An elusive subspecies of brown bear that can occasionally be seen in the summer. A mix of white hair in their outer coats gives them a subtle blue tint.



Tibetan wolf

This subspecies lives in very small packs, typically travelling in pairs or as a trio. Some scientists believe they are the closest relations to domestic dogs.



Snow leopard

China is home to the largest population of snow leopards, known as 'mountain ghosts'. Their huge paws act like snowshoes, helping them to silently stalk prey.

Watch black-necked cranes dance

One of the most elegant displays of nature in China can be observed in the high-altitude wetlands of the Tibetan Plateau, where, during summer, black-necked cranes perform mesmerising dances that include moves such as jumping, wing-flapping, bowing and plant tossing, among other actions. Although it is generally agreed that courtship is their primary motive, experts believe that cranes dance for other reasons too, including stress relief and strengthening bonds with their lifelong partners. Due to its remote habitat, this species was the last crane to be formally documented in 1876.

Ride a camel on the Silk Road

While elephants splash about in the tropical south, in the far north Bactrian camels patrol the arid borderlands of the Gobi Desert. These hardy, two-humped beasts have survived in this harsh terrain for centuries, and once played an instrumental role in transporting goods on this section of the Silk Road, which connected Asia to Europe. Nowadays, they offer up-close – if bumpy – tours of Gansu's otherworldly sand-dunes, which are said to 'sing' or 'echo' as they are continually re-sculpted by the wind.

Top tips

Present and correct
Giving and receiving gifts is still common practice in China, but don't feel obligated to spend big. Small gifts like CDs, books and candy are perfectly acceptable.

Travel light
Hand luggage on domestic flights in China is limited to just five kilograms (11 pounds) – that's half the allowance in Europe. Make sure you don't exceed it or you may have to pay excess baggage.

Don't holiday on holidays
Avoid visiting China during official holidays. Doing so will ensure shorter queues at parks and monuments as well as much less crowded photos. Better still, transport terminals and transits between cities will be far less chaotic.

Key kit



Hiking shoes
Look for shoes that are designed for both comfort and support, with padded soles and a breathable lining. You'll need something suitable for rocky mountainsides and China's diverse terrain.



Pollution mask
China's cities are renowned for their high levels of pollution. Filter out dust, pollen and pollutants with a mask. These are particularly valuable if you have a respiratory condition such as asthma.



Camera
There'll be plenty of sights you'll want to capture on your trip, so invest in a lightweight camera that will fit easily into your pocket. Modern instant cameras can be a fun way of documenting your travels.



Chinese language app
You won't become fluent in Mandarin using an app, but it will at least help you with the basics. Several platforms use game-based learning, and you can squeeze lessons in whenever you have time.



A GPS watch
Consider investing in a GPS watch, especially if you're venturing off the beaten track. Look for models with an altimeter, barometer and compass. Track your route progress and save points of interest along the way.

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Who to travel with

Family
Wendy Wu Tours
WENDYWUTOURS.CO.UK

In Pursuit of Pandas
See historic sites and pandas at Chengdu on this nine-day trip. From £1,890pp (~$2,430), including flights.

Explorer
Naturetrek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

Wild China – Sichuan's Birds & Mammals
16 days in Sichuan province, home to some of China's iconic species. From £4,795pp (~$6,150), including flights.

Luxury
Natural Habitat Adventures
NATHAB.COM

The Wild Side of China – A Nature Odyssey
12-day wildlife-focused trip in Sichuan's Minshan Mountains, where you can visit pandas in the wild. From ~£9,400pp ($11,995).



Borneo

Visit the rugged, remote island where evolution ran wild, and embark upon an adventure that will wow even the most seasoned of travellers

Words **Alex Dale**

Travel expert

Catherine Capon is an environmentalist and wildlife filmmaker at the eco-friendly holiday provider, Responsible Travel

"One of the most famous things about Borneo is its weird and wonderful wildlife. It's worth heading into Indonesian Kalimantan, whose jungles must be navigated by river. Long-limbed orangutans are the huge draw, but proboscis monkeys – only found here – are the perpetual crowd pleasers. The Malaysian state of Sabah is one of only two places on Earth where ten primate species are found. Dawn and nocturnal tours along the Kinabatangan River are among Borneo's most tranquil experiences and they allow you to cruise through a forest filled with monkeys, elephants, rhinoceros hornbills and orangutans – kick back and watch it all float by."

Paradise flying snake

More 'falling with style' than flying, the paradise flying snake navigates the forest by slithering to the end of a branch and propelling itself off, whereupon it flattens its body out, allowing it to glide distances of up to 100 metres (330 feet).



Horsfield's tarsier

A night safari offers the best odds of witnessing this tiny, otherworldly-looking primate's lethal hunting technique. It uses sound to locate prey such as birds and insects in the dark, before springing as far as two metres (6.5 feet) to catch its dinner.

Bornean orangutan

Orangutans are the largest tree-dwelling apes in the world, and are found exclusively in Asia. Bornean orangutans have darker, shorter hair than their Sumatran relatives, and are less sociable.

Sumatran rhinoceros

Sadly, this small, dual-horned rhinoceros seems doomed to extinction; threatened by poachers and habitat loss, less than 100 wild individuals remain on neighbouring Sumatra, and there are just a handful of survivors found in east Kalimantan.

1 Bako National Park, Sarawak
2 Kinabalu National Park, Sabah
3 Danum Valley Conservation Area, Sabah
4 Kutai National Park, Kalimantan
5 Tanjung Puting National Park, Kalimantan

Sunda clouded leopard

There are no tigers on Borneo, so in their absence this agile leopard, equally at home on the ground or in the trees, is the island's largest predator. Until 2006, it was considered a subspecies of the mainland clouded leopard.



Travel guide

When to go

The dry season (April to November) is the best time to visit if you are hoping to see orangutans on your trip.

How to get there

Malaysian Borneo has several international airports. Change at Kuala Lumpur or Hong Kong to reach Kuching or Kota Kinabalu.

The weather

November to March is the 'wet' season, but the tropical monsoon climate means you should prepare for rain at any time.

What to take

Borneo is in a malarial zone, so take a course of anti-malarial tablets. Sun cream and mosquito repellent are essential, too.

What you'll see

Although much of Borneo's rainforest has been destroyed, what remains continues to amaze; all kinds of life can be found there.

Bornean adventures



Mulu Caves

This World Heritage Site is a breathtaking system of vast limestone caves. One of these, Clearwater Cave, is argued to be the biggest interconnected cave system in the world by volume. New passages are still being uncovered as the network is explored.



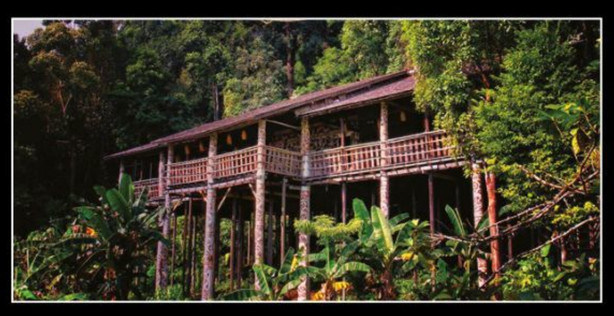
Equator Monument

Pontianak, the capital of Indonesian Borneo, is the only city in the world to sit on the equator line, a fact it celebrates with this monument. Popular sites include mosques, museums and Sentarum Lake.



Jellyfish Lake

In Kakaban Island's Jellyfish Lake, you can get up close and personal with clouds of jellyfish, made up of four species that have evolved without stingers, as they have no natural predators.



Sarawak longhouse

For a glimpse at the reality of remote jungle life, you can book a stay with the Iban tribe, who live in communal shacks on stilts. Many families will share one long building divided into rooms.



Cat City

Sarawak's largest city is Kuching, which translates as 'cat' in the Malay language. As a result, statues and museums throughout the city have taken on a feline theme.

Hang with the orangutan

Orangutans are Asia's only native great apes. Cut off from their (now extinct) mainland relatives thousands of years ago, Borneo's orangutans adapted to forest life, their long arms allowing them to swing through the canopy as fast as you could run on the floor below.

Cumbersome on land, orangutans spend around 90% of their lives in the treetops, where they feast on fruits such as durians and lychees. They play an important role in the rainforest, dispersing seeds through their dung and enabling sunlight to penetrate the thick canopies when they break off branches to build their nests.

Visitors hoping to catch a glimpse of wild Borneo's poster child are spoilt for choice. The most hassle-free (but somewhat artificial) way is to visit one of the island's many rehabilitation centres. Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, in Sarawak, Malaysia, is one of the more ethically-minded, geared towards reintroducing captive or injured orangutans into the wild. Here you can watch them socialise and feed from a viewing platform at a safe distance.

More intrepid explorers may prefer to visit national parks where sightings of wild orangutans are possible, if not always guaranteed; Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary and Danum Valley, both in Sabah, Malaysia, are popular options.

Meet mild-mannered pygmy elephants

The origin of the world's smallest elephant remains unclear. It was long believed that they were the descendants of a domesticated herd of mainland Asian elephants that were released onto the island in the 18th century, which would explain their gentle nature. But more recent studies using DNA suggest that Borneo elephants have been isolated by their cousins for at least 300,000 years and are now considered to be a separate subspecies. Either way, the 'pygmy' moniker is a little misleading; growing to as tall as 2.5 metres (eight feet), the Borneo elephant is only slightly smaller than other subspecies of Asian elephants.

Due to deforestation, this endangered elephant's range is now restricted to northeastern Borneo. Numerous conservation areas in Sabah, most notably Tabin Wildlife Reserve and Ulu Kalumpang Forest Reserve, have been designated to promote sustainable tourism and ensure the continued survival of this baby-faced, docile elephant.

Hear the honks of proboscis monkeys

You're likely to hear these comical-looking primates long before you see them – the males use their distinctive flattened noses to emit a loud honk that echoes through the treetops when they wish to alert the rest of their group to danger.

The proboscis monkey can only be found on Borneo, where it favours mangroves and swamp forests. Largely arboreal (tree-dwelling), their diet consists mainly of leaves, seeds and unripe fruit. This difficult-to-digest diet has resulted in the evolution of another amusing physical feature – their pot bellies. Compartmentalised like a cow's stomach, their complex guts act like a fermentation tank.

Although endangered due to deforestation, there are several places where you have a good chance of an encounter, including Sarawak's Bako National Park and Kalimantan's Tanjung Puting National Park. The best time to arrive is either dawn or dusk, when the monkeys forage for food.

Float past false gharials

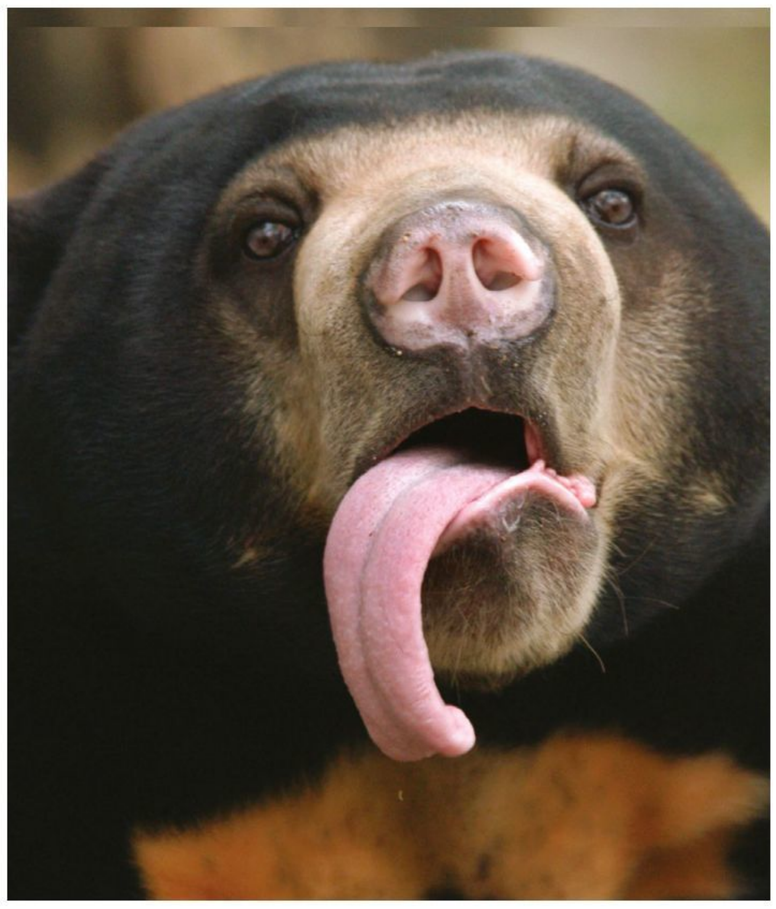


If you embark on a river safari along the peat-swamp forests of the Kinabatangan, you might see this crocodile's slender snout breach the surface. The gharial mainly eats fish, but is known to prey on proboscis monkeys who mistime their daring leaps across branches that overhang the water.



Look out for red leaf monkeys

Meet Borneo's *other* charismatic red primate. This territorial monkey can be found in lowland forests, where it feeds on seeds, fruit and flowers. It lives in small groups typically consisting of a single male and several females and infants. In all, Borneo is home to ten different primate species. The Danum Valley Conservation Area in Sabah is one of a handful of places where all ten co-exist.



Soak up rays with the mini Malayan sun bears

Taking its name from the crescent-shaped marking on its chest, the world's smallest bear has a wide, short muzzle that makes it slightly dog-like in appearance. Like so many of Borneo's mammals, the sun bear has adapted itself for life in the trees, with feet turned slightly inwards and thick claws that allow it to both climb and rip bark apart in search of food. They are particularly fond of honey, and the gaping holes they tear in trees while they hunt for it often become homes for hornbills and flying squirrels. The bears also disperse seeds and control termite numbers in the forest.

Sun bears are reclusive animals, but Sabah boasts the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre, where they can be readily seen.

Borneo's brilliant bugs



Rajah Brooke's birdwing

Malaysia's national butterfly has a 17-centimetre (seven-inch) wingspan that makes it a powerful flyer. It can cross a river in just three or four wing beats.



Whip scorpion

Breathe easy; it's not a true scorpion, and its whip-like tail doesn't have a stinger. You may get a whiff of vinegar when they spray acid from glands in their abdomen.



Rhinoceros beetle

Found only in Borneo's rainforests, these cantankerous beetles are pound-for-pound the strongest animals going, capable of lifting 850 times their body weight.



Violin beetle

Resembling a dead leaf from afar, this forest-dwelling beetle's flattened body allows it to hide between layers of large fungi.



Giant forest ant

There are more than 700 species of ant in Borneo, and these make up about 5% of the global population. The giant forest ant is just one of these.

Dive into a tornado of barracudas

Borneo's oceanic waters teem with life; in particular Sipadan Island, off the coast of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, is considered one of the top dive spots in the world. The area was a favourite of world-famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau, who proclaimed it "an untouched piece of art."

Sipadan's barrier reef is home to an abundance of green and hawksbill turtles, and sightings of bizarre fish such as the one-metre (3.3-foot) long humphead parrotfish are almost guaranteed. But the highlight for many divers is the aptly named Barracuda Point, where you can find yourself encircled by a shoal of thousands of blacktail barracudas. They swim in this tornado-like pattern to disorient predators, preventing them from homing in on any one fish.

Creep through the rainforest with clouded leopards

The Sunda clouded leopard will be challenging to spot, but keep your eyes trained on the treetops and you may be lucky enough to get a glimpse. These mysterious big cats are particularly proficient climbers, with rotating rear ankles that enable them to walk down trees headfirst. A good place to go on the leopard lookout is Tanjung Puting National Park, an expanse of swamp forest that protrudes into the Java Sea. It is best navigated by klotok, a traditional wooden boat so named for the sound of its motors. The operators double up as excellent wildlife guides and can point you in the direction of macaques, sambar deers and proboscis monkeys, as well as clouded leopards.

Jungle trekking tips

Cover up
Cover as much skin as possible to protect yourself from thorny vegetation and mosquitoes – there is no vaccine for dengue fever, which is carried by day-flying mosquitoes.

Look out for leeches
Terrestrial leeches are a common menace; wear long trousers and secure them with string or clips, or wear leech socks (see below). If one latches on, dislodge it by placing your fingernail between the sucker and your skin and pushing sideways.

Be prepared
It rains frequently and unpredictably. Protect maps and electronics with waterproof wallets and keep a spare change of clothing in your backpack – but pack lightly and save dry clothes for the night where possible.

Trekking essentials



Leech socks
Worn over your socks and inside your shoes, these can be pulled tight with toggles to offer complete protection against ground-dwelling leeches.



Waterproof poncho
Handy for covering your backpack as well as your body while keeping your hands free, a waterproof poncho can also double up as a ground sheet or tent.



Trekking shirt
Invest in a hard-wearing and durable long-sleeved cotton shirt, preferably one with moisture-wicking properties and ventilation mesh to help keep you dry.



A comfortable backpack
A spacious yet comfortable backpack is key. Look for one with an integrated rain cover and ventilated back panel, to help you cope with Borneo's humidity.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Rickshaw Travel
RICKSHAWTRAVEL.CO.UK

Tabin Wildlife Expedition
A three-day trip around the untamed jungle of Tabin National Park. From £598pp (~$770).

Family
Responsible Travel
RESPONSIBLETRAVEL.COM

Borneo Orangutan Holiday
A two-week wildlife adventure. From £3,460pp (~$4,440), including flights.

Luxury
Reef & Rainforest
REEFANDRAINFOREST.CO.UK

The Best of Borneo's Wonderful Wildlife
A comprehensive 12-day tour of the island's flora and fauna. From £3,625pp (~$4,650), including flights.



Australia

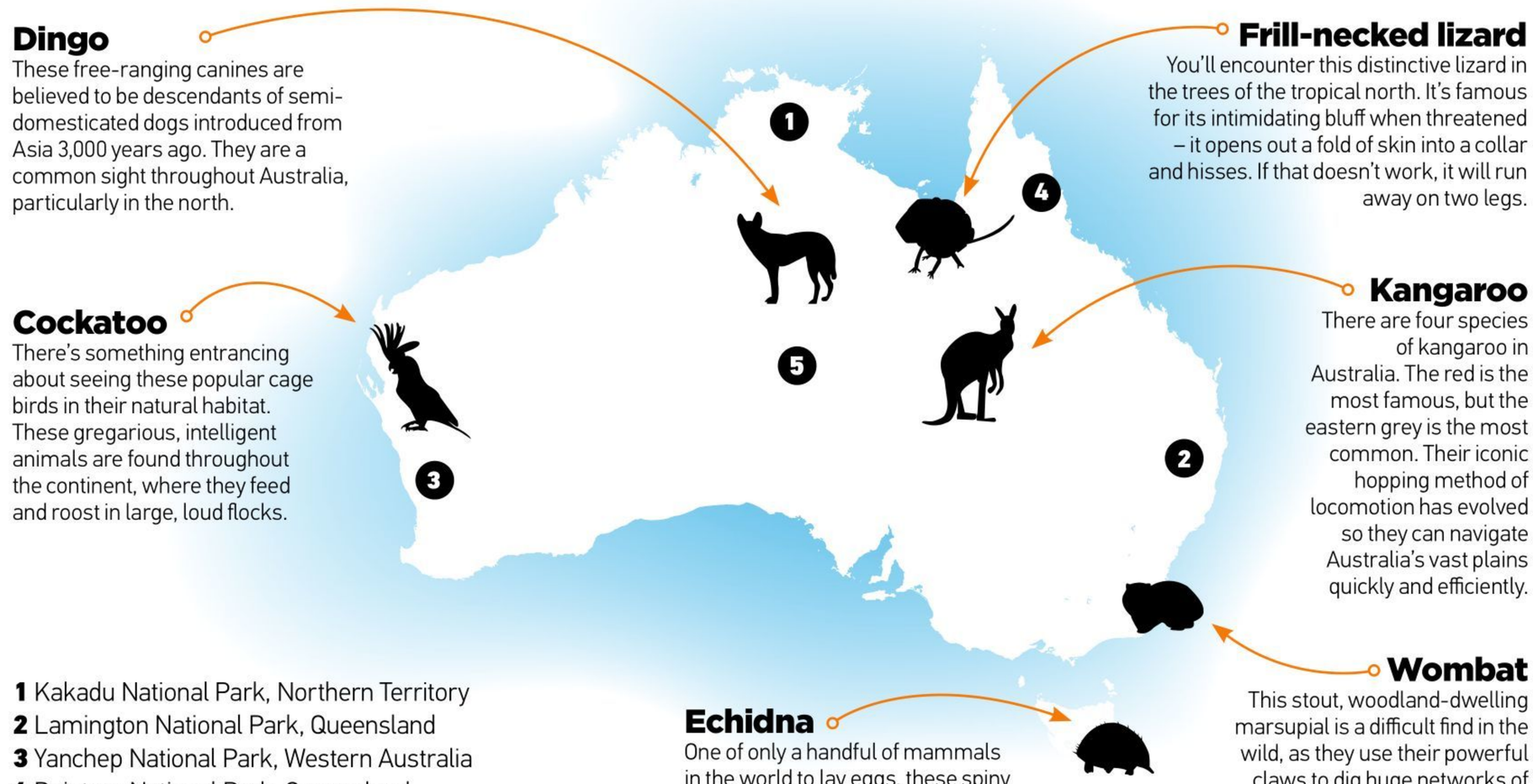
Isolated from the rest of the world for millions of years, this vast and varied island continent is home to dozens of bizarre and beautiful animals that are quite unlike anything else on the planet

Words **Alex Dale**

Travel expert

Fiona Bryce is the manager at STA Travel's Edinburgh branch, and has worked in the industry for more than a decade

"Australia is unusual, to say the least. This is a continent that has existed in isolation for millions of years, slowly evolving to give us some of the most unusual wildlife you'll find anywhere on the planet. Marsupials and monotremes (egg-laying mammals) are the norm on this massive island continent, with some of the world's most dangerous reptiles thrown in for good measure. Inland you are guaranteed to learn of an animal you had never heard of before and get a wildlife encounter you just weren't expecting. The quokkas on Rottnest Island are one of the sweetest creatures you'll ever take a selfie with! If you're lucky, out on the open ocean a dolphin may want to take a swim with you – but it's up to them!"



Dingo
These free-ranging canines are believed to be descendants of semi-domesticated dogs introduced from Asia 3,000 years ago. They are a common sight throughout Australia, particularly in the north.

Cockatoo
There's something entrancing about seeing these popular cage birds in their natural habitat. These gregarious, intelligent animals are found throughout the continent, where they feed and roost in large, loud flocks.

Frill-necked lizard
You'll encounter this distinctive lizard in the trees of the tropical north. It's famous for its intimidating bluff when threatened – it opens out a fold of skin into a collar and hisses. If that doesn't work, it will run away on two legs.

Kangaroo
There are four species of kangaroo in Australia. The red is the most famous, but the eastern grey is the most common. Their iconic hopping method of locomotion has evolved so they can navigate Australia's vast plains quickly and efficiently.

Wombat
This stout, woodland-dwelling marsupial is a difficult find in the wild, as they use their powerful claws to dig huge networks of underground burrows. Looking at dusk is your best chance, when they emerge to graze.

Echidna
One of only a handful of mammals in the world to lay eggs, these spiny insectivores are found throughout Australia, but are particularly prevalent in the forests of Tasmania.

1 Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory
2 Lamington National Park, Queensland
3 Yanchep National Park, Western Australia
4 Daintree National Park, Queensland
5 Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park, Northern Territory



Travel guide

When to go
Australia's warm, dry autumn season, which falls between March and May, is the best time to visit, particularly for diving.

How to get there
Indirect (and some direct) flights from London head to Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Darwin and more.

The weather
Temperatures vary across the country, but summer runs from November to March, when it will regularly exceed 30°C (86°F).

Best items to pack
Take insect repellent and a first aid kit for emergencies. Sunscreen, water and comfortable shoes are also must-haves.

What you'll see
A huge cast of charismatic creatures that have evolved in a self-contained ecosystem make Oz unlike anywhere else in the world.

Dive in to the Great Barrier Reef – the rainforest of the ocean

Spanning over 2,250 kilometres (1,400 miles) of coastline, the Great Barrier Reef is large enough to be seen from space and can be considered the largest living thing on the planet. Coral reef systems such as this are comprised of billions of tiny marine invertebrates called coral polyps, which cluster into colonies and secrete a rigid exoskeleton that protects them from the elements.

Typically, tropical waters aren't capable of sustaining much life, but coral reefs thrive because they provide shelter to microscopic algae, which enrich the surrounding waters with nutrients. These favourable conditions encourage thousands of other species to make the reef their home.

As such, the Great Barrier Reef is a riot of colour and life; over 1,500 types of fish, 30 species of whale and dolphin, 215 kinds of bird and six species of turtle rely on the reef's delicate ecosystem.

Sadly, this natural wonder is in decline due to several environmental factors. You can experience its charm responsibly by snorkelling or scuba diving with reputable firms, or taking a glass-bottom boat tour. Try to avoid visiting during the wet season (December to March), as water visibility can be poor.

Hop over to Kangaroo Island

Although Kangaroo Island is only a short hop, skip and jump away from Adelaide, that's luckily a leap too far for the foxes and rabbits that have decimated Australia's mainland ever since they were first introduced to the region by European settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries.

As a result, visiting this rugged island of craggy caves, sand dunes and undisturbed bushland is like stepping back in time to Australia's wilder past. A dizzying array of native species thrive on this diverse island, from possums and echidnas to the Australian sea lions that can be found basking on the island's pristine beaches.

It is also, as the name hints, one of the best places in Australia to observe wild kangaroos and wallabies. The island is home to its own unique sub-species, the sooty kangaroo, which is stockier than its mainland relative, with brown, coarse fur. Much of Kangaroo Island is comprised of protected national parks that are off-limit to the casual explorer, but guided tours take you into the heart of the nature reserves, where you can mingle with wild 'roos that are used to human visitors. The best time to arrive is in the cooler mornings or evenings, when the kangaroos are more active.

Wonders of Oz



Ayers Rock

If you're planning an outback excursion in or around Alice Springs, be sure to make the long detour west to see this breathtaking monolithic sandstone rock.



Great Ocean Road

Hugging 245 kilometres (150 miles) of Victoria coastline, this is one of the world's greatest coastal drives. Look out for the Twelve Apostles – a striking cluster of limestone rock stacks.



Sydney Harbour

It's known as the most beautiful natural harbour in the world. Take it all in from atop Sydney Tower, which offers breathtaking views of the waters below.



Phillip Island

If you've checked Australia's iconic creatures off the list, waddle over to Phillip Island and see one of the continent's less well-known natives – a penguin colony.



Whitsunday Islands

Off the coast of Queensland, a trip to this group of islands is like paradise. Enjoy crystal waters and white sandy beaches, in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef.

Hang out with koalas along the Great Ocean Road

Rivalled only by the kangaroo for the crown of Australia's most iconic animal, the koala bear can be found dozing in the forked branches of eucalyptus trees throughout eastern Australia. Its name is a misnomer; it is not a bear and is actually more closely related to the wombat.

This docile marsupial spends almost all of its life in woodland canopies, sustaining itself on a diet consisting almost exclusively of eucalyptus leaves. These leaves contain enough moisture to ensure the marsupials rarely need to leave their perch in search for water, but are nutrient-poor, meaning the koala has to spend up to 20 hours a day resting.

One of the most time-effective ways to go koala-spotting is to tie it in with a tour of the Great Ocean Road. The Kennet River Koala Walk, between Lorne and Apollo Bay, is prime koala territory. The koalas' grey coats can make them hard to spot, so move slowly and quietly and listen for telltale signs of rustling in the branches above.

Go duck, beaver and otter spotting – all at once

Australia's geographic isolation has given rise to numerous evolutionary oddities, but there is none more bizarre than the platypus; a semi-aquatic mammal with the body of an otter, the tail of a beaver and the webbed feet and bill of a duck. Unusually for a mammal, it lays eggs instead of giving birth, and males have venomous spurs on the heels of their hind legs, which can give a nasty shock to enemies.

Platypuses are widespread in freshwater rivers across eastern Australia, but they are elusive, staying underwater for several minutes before emerging for air. The best time to lie in wait is at dawn or dusk, when they forage in slow-moving waters for shrimp, crayfish and worms. Remain still, mask your outline by sitting near a bush or tree, and keep your eyes peeled for telltale ripples in the water.

Meet the mountain-climbing marsupials



There are 15 species of rock wallaby scattered throughout the semi-arid lands of central Australia. These small kangaroos are adapted for life on the steep mountains, with thick skin on their feet for grip and long tails for balance. Granite Gorge Nature Park, Queensland, is a great place to observe these agile beauties.

Swim with a shark the size of a school bus

From mid-March to late-July every year, whale sharks congregate at the Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, to enjoy the spoils of the coral spawning season. At up to 12 metres (40 feet) in length, whale sharks are the largest fish in the world. This is one of the few places where they gather in coastal waters, and tour guides operating in the region offer the rare chance to swim alongside them.



Roam with the wandering emu

Towering over the vegetation at an average height of two metres (six feet), this shaggy flightless bird cuts an unmistakable profile as it roams the country's woodland in its eternal search for food.

Emus lead a nomadic existence and can be found roaming throughout the country, in all but the most arid parts of central Australia. Emus typically travel and hunt in pairs or alone, although occasionally they will form large flocks when travelling long distances to new food sources. Generally, emus will head north during summer (December to February) and south in winter.

Emus are generally docile but are capable of running up to 48 kilometres (30 miles) per hour, and can deliver a powerful kick if they feel threatened. It's best to observe these majestic birds from a distance, keeping something large, like a car or tree, between you and them.

Barrier Reef beauties



Banded sea krait

Sea snakes can often be seen basking on the water's surface. They shed their skins frequently, to avoid being weighed down by barnacle growth.



Hawksbill turtle

Named after its parrot-like beak, this sea turtle plays an important role in maintaining the balance of the coral reef ecosystem, gobbling up sponges that might otherwise out-compete the coral for resources.



Clownfish

Immune to the sting of the reef's resident sea anemones, the clownfish seeks refuge from predators within their tentacles.



Dugong

This mammoth sea-faring mammal visits the Great Barrier Reef to graze on sea-grass. Its fluked tail is believed to be the inspiration behind tales of mermaids.



Crown-of-thorns starfish

Over 400 species of coral grow on the reef, thanks to the efforts of this carnivorous starfish, which preys on the most competitive species.

Hear the blood-curdling scream of the Tasmanian devil

Once widespread across Australia, this small, ill-tempered marsupial is now only found on the island state of Tasmania, which can be reached from Melbourne or Sydney by flight or ferry.

These nocturnal scavengers are notoriously difficult to spot in the wild, so the best way to see them in action – and to discover why early settlers gave them their fearsome moniker – is to book onto a night-feeding tour.

These displays are not for the faint of heart. Tasmanian devils use their keen sense of smell to sniff out fresh animal corpses, which they descend upon in large, rowdy groups. The devils squabble among themselves over the choice cuts, with aggressive displays of teeth-baring, lunging and shrieking. Don't expect any leftovers when they're done; the devils' powerful jaws even cut through the carcass' bones.

Track wild crocodiles in historic Kakadu

There is no shortage of reasons to make the long journey north to Kakadu National Park; it's a birdwatcher's paradise, hosting over a third of all species found in Australia, and the rock art paintings – some of which date back 20,000 years – provide a rare glimpse into Australian Aboriginal culture.

The main draw, however, is the opportunity to have a Crocodile Dundee adventure. There are both freshwater and saltwater crocodiles in Kakadu. The saltwater species is the larger of the two, growing to lengths of six metres (20 feet). It is also the most dangerous; to safely observe these predators, pay attention to warning signs, stay away from water edges, and stick to viewing platforms such as that at Cahill's Crossing. Safer still, take a guided tour operating out of Darwin. The best time to go is dry season (July to September), when the lower water levels make it easier to croc-spot.

Outback safari tips

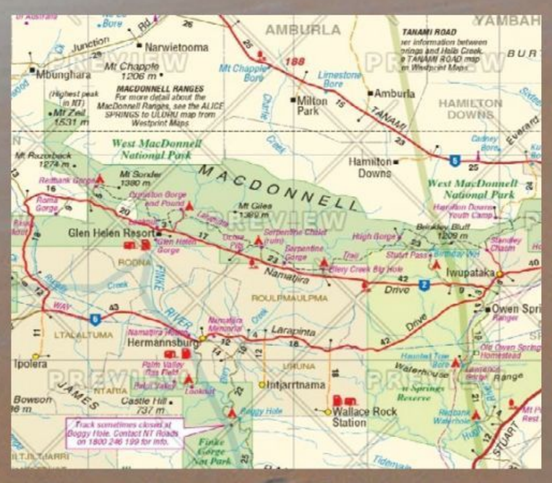
Be prepared
Phone signals are few and far between in the outback, so share your itinerary with friends, family or the local police so they know to look for you if you're overdue.

Be vigilant
Animals such as kangaroos, emus and cows frequently wander on the roads, putting both their lives and yours at risk. Avoid driving when tired, and don't travel long distances at night.

Stock up
Temperatures soar in the daytime, and plummet at night, so always prepare for the worst. You should carry about five litres of water per person per day, and sleeping blankets and fleeces for the night.



Outback essentials



Detailed area maps
If you're exploring the remote areas of Australian outback, make sure you take a map highlighting areas of interest along the way. Some companies (such as Westprint) will create custom maps, for an additional fee.



A travel boiler system
A perfect companion for those long, cold nights, it's a good idea to take an easy-to-assemble water boiling system. It will mean you have a quick way to rustle up some soup, noodles or a hot cup of tea or coffee on demand.



Headlamps
A powerful, lightweight headlamp with a generous battery life is essential. In the unlikely event you need a top-up, you can recharge many models from a laptop via a USB cable. But you might prefer to take a backup for peace of mind.



A guide to Australia's dangerous wildlife
Australia is flush with harmful creatures. Make sure you take a guidebook or pamphlet that can help you identify them, with advice on how to stay safe, and how to treat injuries if the worst happens.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Real Aussie Adventures
REALAUSSIEADVENTURES.COM

Mt Field, Mt Wellington and Bonorong
A one-day tour with the chance to see and feed Tasmanian devils. From ~£60pp (~$75).

Family
Audley Travel
AUDLEYTRAVEL.COM

Family Australia
17-day tour of national parks and the Great Barrier Reef. From £3,770pp (~$4,900), including flights.

Luxury
Naturetrek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

Queensland's Rainforests & Great Barrier Reef
16-day tour featuring the best Australian wildlife. From £5,995pp (~$7,700), including flights.

New Zealand

These epic volcanic islands may not really be home to orcs and hobbits, but they are a haven for marine wildlife and a few evolutionary oddities found nowhere else on the planet

Words **Laura Mears**



Travel expert

Nature-lovers Doug Johansen and Jan Poole established the Kiwi Dundee tour agency in 1994 on the North Island's Coromandel Peninsula

"New Zealand is a very unusual country as the only native land mammals are very small bats. When humans arrived in New Zealand about 950 CE, they came to a land full of reptiles and birds, such as the moa, which was the largest bird on Earth. The first Polynesians were known as moa hunters and had wiped out the giant bird by approximately 1800. Due to the lack of predators, over millions of years many birds lost the ability to fly, so when settlers came and brought their mammals with them, we lost many species of bird.

Today, you can see some of our endangered birds and reptiles in reserves and zoos, while others can still be found in their natural habitat out in the wild. The giant trees in our podocarp forests also make New Zealand a beautiful and unique country to visit."

Glow worm
To witness this country's most illuminating display of nature, you must head underground into a network of caves just west of Hangatiki Scenic Reserve.

Fiordland crested penguin
New Zealand is home to some 2,000 pairs of this forest-dwelling penguin, found nowhere else on Earth. It is one of three penguin species that live on the South Island and the Subantarctic Islands.

Kiwi
New Zealand's unofficial national symbol is nocturnal and very shy, but it's still possible to see these charismatic birds in the wild in a few sites across both the North and South Islands.



1 Stewart Island
2 Waitomo Caves
3 Lake Moeraki
4 Tiritiri Matangi Open Sanctuary
5 Kaikoura
6 Otago Peninsula

Tuatara
These lizard-like reptiles are the last remaining members of an ancient order that dates back to prehistoric times. Although no longer present on the mainland, they have found sanctuary on a number of minor islands.

Sperm whale
Cetacean-lovers will have a field day in New Zealand, with around 50% of all known species having been sighted in its waters. The underwater topology off Kaikoura is perfect for sperm whales, who have taken up permanent residence here.

Royal albatross
This remote promontory on the South Island is a haven for birds of all shapes and sizes, from the smallest penguin to the world's largest seabirds.



Travel guide

When to go
For decent weather but fewer crowds, aim to go between March and April or from September to November.

How to get there
You're looking at a minimum of 23 hours travelling by plane. Consider a 24-hour stop off to break up the journey.

The weather
New Zealand has a similar climate to the UK, but temperatures drop the farther south you go.

What to take
To really appreciate New Zealand's nature, go hiking. Sturdy boots and a waterproof jacket are a must.

What you'll see
Anyone who's watched *The Lord Of The Rings* or *The Hobbit* films will immediately recognise the dramatic scenery, but the Maori culture is just as interesting.



Picture a penguin – in the rainforest!

You don't have to venture to frozen lands to photograph penguins in their natural habitat. Indeed, New Zealand boasts three species of these flippered birds, all found on the mainland, plus a few of its southern islands. The super-rare tawaki, or Fiordland crested penguin, is probably the most unusual of the trio in that it typically nests in the coastal rainforest on the southern shores of the South Island – one of the last places you'd imagine seeing these quintessentially Antarctic birds! During their breeding season (July to December), in areas like Haast and Lake Moeraki, it's possible to see tawaki emerge from the sea, waddle across a beach and disappear into the forest. Your best chance for great snaps is to hire a local guide, who will not only know the best nesting sites but will also be clued up on factors like the tides.

New Zealand's other two species are the yellow-eyed penguin, or hoiho, and the little blue penguin, or korora. Also known as the fairy penguin, the latter is the planet's smallest penguin, growing only 33 centimetres (13 inches) tall on average. Both can be found on the South Island, with the Otago Peninsula being a prime penguin hotspot.

Seek out a national icon

Few animals embody a nation quite like the kiwi. Not only does this flightless bird feature on New Zealand's currency, stamps, military insignia and sports team logos, but the general populace has even proudly adopted it as a nickname.

There are five recognised species of kiwi, which make up a total population of around 68,000 birds. Even among ratite relatives like emus and rheas – known for their bristly feathers and barely visible wings – kiwis boast some unique physiology. For one thing, they are the only birds with nostrils at the end of their beaks, which they use to sniff out insects buried in the forest floor. Their eggs are also huge; in fact, in proportion to their bodies, kiwis lay the largest eggs of any bird – they can be up to a quarter the weight of the mother!

For all their charm, kiwis are not the easiest birds to see. They are largely active at night and, though their calls are distinct, their colouring and habitat make them difficult to spot. For a sure-fire sighting, plan a visit to a sanctuary, such as Otorohanga Kiwi House on the North Island, which have special enclosures that recreate nocturnal conditions.

For those adamant on seeing a kiwi in the wild, sign up to a dedicated night tour in locations such as Okarito, Aroha Island and Stewart Island.

National parks



Tongariro

This is New Zealand's oldest national park, donated by the Maori in 1887. It is home to three active volcanoes, known as Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu.



Abel Tasman

This park boasts lush forest, rocky features and golden beaches. Rock pools and granite reefs just off the shore provide excellent opportunities for viewing marine life up close.



Fiordland

The country's largest national park is a wonderland of mountains, lakes, waterfalls and fjords straight out of Middle Earth.



Paparoa

Highlights of this coastal reserve are the odd-looking Pancake Rocks and Blowholes that blast out seawater at high tide. Both are caused by centuries of erosion.



Westland Tai Poutini

Although this park has countless natural wonders, it's best known for its glaciers. Enjoy the views but always respect warning signs – the ice can be dangerous.

Splash out on a sealife safari

Although terrestrial mammals are scarce in New Zealand, the waters surrounding it are teeming with marine mammals. In terms of cetaceans alone, nearly 40 species of whales, ten species of dolphin and one porpoise have been spotted in the coastal waters here.

Thanks to a sheer drop in the seabed unusually close to the shore, the Kaikoura region on the South Island is one of the world's premier cetacean-spotting locations. Most famous for its resident sperm whales and pods of playful dusky dolphins, the area also attracts passing nomadic marine species, such as humpback whales, orca and even the odd blue whale.

One of the most efficient ways of viewing these ocean giants is from the air, with whale-watching flights offering a unique perspective and the ability to cover a vast area in little time. If you want to make a day of it, consider exploring the coast by sea kayak. Where else can you see wild dolphins, seals, penguins and even whales in such close proximity?

Go with the glow

It's hard to imagine gnats ever featuring in a list of must-see wildlife, but New Zealand proves to be the exception. Since 1889, locals and tourists alike have been drawn to the Waitomo Caves like proverbial moths to a flame – or at least to a glow worm. Endemic to the Antipodes, the larvae of Arachnocampa gnats make their homes on the roofs of caverns, where they dangle fine sticky threads to catch small insects. To draw in their prey, they emit an ethereal blue-green light from their abdomens, which is the result of a built-in chemical reaction. While we're a little too big for these bugs to snare, it's easy to see why their stunning display has captured our imagination for decades.

Adrenaline junkies will want to take one of the black water rafting tours. These offer the chance to abseil, fly on a subterranean zipline and even float beneath this natural light show, as you go tubing through these otherworldly underground grottoes.

Meet the royals



Along with wandering albatrosses, the royal albatross – or toroa – is the world's largest seabird, with wings spanning up to three metres (ten feet). Seeing these majestic birds up close generally involves getting on a boat, but in New Zealand it's possible to remain on terra firma. In fact, Taiaroa Head at the very tip of the South Island's Otago Peninsula, is home to the Southern Hemisphere's only colony of mainland-nesting albatrosses.

Do your bit for sea lion conservation

Pinnipeds don't come much more charismatic than the New Zealand sea lion. While it's important not to disturb these endangered marine mammals when they're resting on the shore – indeed, it's recommended to keep a distance of at least 10 metres (33 feet) – we can all help to monitor them. If you spot a sea lion wearing a tag, note down its colour and shape and, if possible, the ID; use binoculars or your camera zoom if you are struggling to read the ID number. You can pass all this data on to the New Zealand Sea Lion Trust at **sealiontrust.org.nz**.



Travel back in time with a living fossil

Tuataras have roamed the Earth for around 250 million years, but just because their ancestors hung out with the dinosaurs, it doesn't mean that they're stuck in the past. In fact, studies have shown these lizard-like reptiles are the fastest-evolving animals, with more 'recent' genetic adaptations than any other creature examined to date.

'Tuatara' means 'peaks on the back' in Maori, referring to its dorsal spines. But these aren't its most unusual feature: that prize has to go to a third eye located on top of its head! Although this extra eye includes a lens and retina, it is not used to see. However, it's thought that this extra eye can perceive light, which might help it determine the time of day or season.

At present, the wild tuatara population is restricted to 32 islands off mainland New Zealand, but not all of these are open to the public. One of the best options is Tiritiri Matangi – just over an hour's ferry ride from Auckland.

Endemic birds



Weka
Unlike many birds, these ground-dwellers are drawn to populated areas. They are part of the rail family, which is the same family as coots and crakes.



New Zealand falcon
The country's only falcon may be fairly small, but it shows a lot of spirit. In fact, some vineyards in wine-making regions, such as Marlborough, have employed these birds to defend the vines from natural pests.



Bellbird
This cheerful chirper gets its name from its distinctive song, once described by explorer James Cook as: "like small bells most exquisitely tuned."



Takahē
Once thought to have gone extinct, the takahē was rediscovered in the mid-20th century, though only on the South Island.



Yellow-crowned parakeet
This colourful bird was once common across all of New Zealand. Its range has dwindled, but it can still be found in larger mainland forests and on offshore islands.

Meet a prodigious parrot

Parrots don't come much more bizarre than New Zealand's kākāpō. As well as being the heaviest parrot, tipping the scales at two kilograms (6.6 pounds), it is also the only nocturnal and flightless member of the family. Unfortunately, it's one of the rarest species too, with only around 125 individuals left in the wild. Now restricted to three small islands carefully managed by the government, your best chance of seeing one up close is to visit Maud Island in the Marlborough Sounds. Here you can meet Sirocco, a hand-reared kākāpō who serves as an ambassador for his kin; he has even been dubbed an "official spokesbird for conservation" by New Zealand's prime minister.

Mingle with the minority mammals

Environmentalist David Bellamy once described New Zealand as the "land without teeth," referring to its unusual lack of mammals. Indeed, its only endemic mammalian representatives are bats. Any other species you may see here, such as rats, stoats and possums, were all introduced by settlers. The two native bats are the long-tailed (which is the most common) and the lesser short-tailed. You don't have to venture far to see them, with evening bat tours available in major cities such as Auckland and Hamilton. They move very quickly though, so you'll have to keep your eyes peeled!

Top tips

The name game

You may hear certain towns and cities referred to by multiple names: both in English and in Maori. To find out which is the officially recognised place name, you can consult the New Zealand Gazetteer online.

Take your time

It's worth factoring extra time into your journeys if you're driving. Roads are often circuitous and one-way bridges are common. Besides, with scenery as stunning as New Zealand's, why would you want to rush?

Explore Middle Earth

As well as being able to walk around Hobbiton itself – it's now a permanent attraction – you can also visit some of the wilder landscapes from the movies. For instance, Mount Sunday, west of Christchurch, was the location for Edoras, while Kaitoke Regional Park, near Wellington, was transformed into Rivendell.

Tramping gear



Compass

Old-school hikers would never dream of stepping outside without one, but modern compasses are much more advanced than their predecessors. Top models have globally balanced needles, a mirror and a clinometer to assess gradients.



Handheld GPS

GPS systems are invaluable when heading out into the wilderness. You can plot out routes in advance, and some models also include a camera enabling you to capture geotagged photographs of your adventure.



Sunglasses

Fed up of sunglasses always slipping off? Get in a pair specifically designed to snugly fit slightly smaller heads. Make sure they have lenses with 100% UV protection, especially if you're planning high-altitude hikes.



Hiking poles

If you're heading out on a strenuous hike, consider taking poles. You can find super-light carbon fiber or aluminium poles, which can be adjusted to suit different heights. Look for folding models so you can pack them away more easily.



Hiking shoes

You'll need shoes that are well-suited to New Zealand's varied terrain. Make sure they're comfortable, water-resistant, and with a breathable inner lining to help keep your feet fresh on a trek, whatever the weather.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Great Sights
GREATSIGHTS.CO.NZ

Waitomo Glowworm Express – Auckland Return
Escape the city and experience Waitomo's magical glow worms. An adult day ticket costs ~£135 (~$175).

Family
Kiwi Dundee
KIWIDUNDEE.CO.NZ

Coromandel Nature and Coast Tour
Explore the scenic highlights of the Coromandel Peninsula during this guided day trip, including a stop at the famous Hot Water Beach. Tours cost ~£150pp (~$200).

Luxury
Nature Trek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

New Zealand's Natural History
This 22-day trip focuses on New Zealand's unique birds, seeking out kiwis, penguins, albatrosses and more. From £7,995pp (~$10,200), including flights.

Canada

The vast wilds of Canada are home to more than 400 species of bird, almost 200 species of mammal, and some of the most spectacular scenery in the world

Words **Laura Mears**



Travel expert

Robin Esrock is the author of *The Great Canadian Bucket List* and host of TV series *Word Travels*

"Canada is home to the great northern animals, and is an ideal destination for unforgettable wildlife encounters. In Churchill, Manitoba, polar bears migrate every fall. Specialised buggies allow visitors to stare directly into the eyes of these incredible (yet ferocious) creatures.

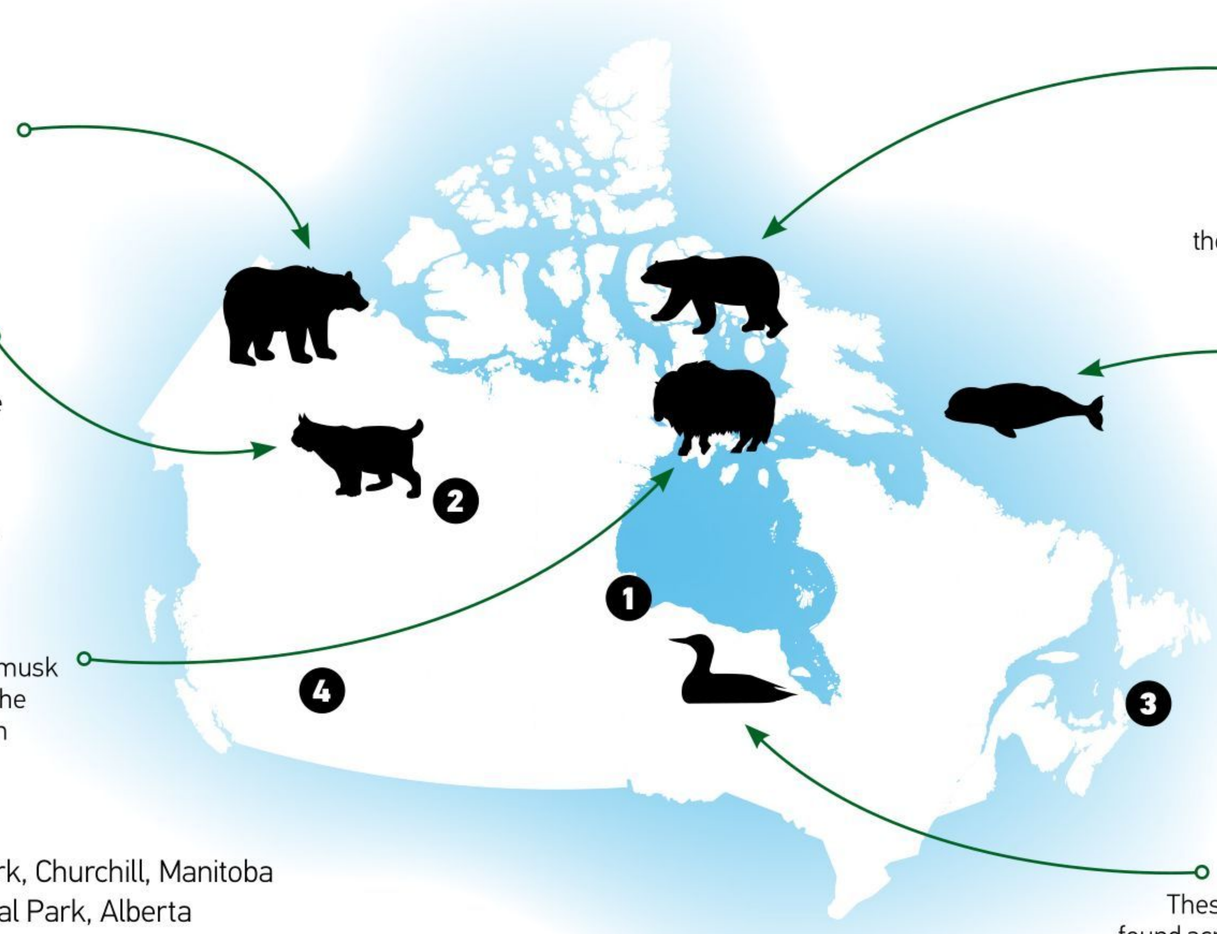
In British Columbia, you can track grizzly bears by canoe, sail alongside pods of orcas, and spot the rare and mythical Spirit Bear.

In Saskatchewan, you can go horse riding alongside free-roaming bison, while in Alberta you might see elk, moose and even wolverines while skiing in Banff National Park. Thousands of beluga whales splash at your feet in the Arctic, wolf packs howl at visitors in Ontario's Algonquin Park, while bald eagles, Canada geese and great blue herons patrol the northern skies."

Black bear
Black bears can be found across most of Canada, but sightings are more frequent in the northern parts of the country.

Canada lynx
These solitary hunters have a taste for snowshoe hare, and can be found stalking their prey in much of the vast snowy taiga forest that stretches across Canada.

Musk ox
Hardy and hairy, herds of musk oxen have been roaming the icy landscapes of northern Canada for millennia.



Polar bear
These icons of the Arctic are found only in the northernmost reaches of Canada, where they spend their time hunting seals in the frozen landscape.

Beluga whale
Beluga whales are found in the Arctic Ocean and surrounding seas, including Canada's Hudson Bay. In the summer, they can also be spotted in the Yukon and St Lawrence rivers.

Common loon
These large and noisy ducks are found across Canada in the summer, but retreat to the warmth of the coastlines in the winter.

1 Wapusk National Park, Churchill, Manitoba
2 Wood Buffalo National Park, Alberta
3 Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Nova Scotia
4 Banff and Jasper National Parks, Rocky Mountains



Travel guide

When to go
It is best to visit Canada between May and November, when the days are longer and the weather is warmer.

How to get there
Getting to Canada from the UK is best done by air. Once there, you can choose to travel by car, train, boat, bus or bike.

The weather
Summer temperatures in southern Canada can climb above 30°C (86°F). In winter, most of the country is below freezing.

What to take
Comfortable walking shoes or hiking boots, plus layers of windproof and waterproof clothing are always a good idea.

What you'll see
From the peaks of British Columbia to the Great Lakes, Canada is home to iconic wildlife and jaw-dropping scenery.

Meet Canada's giant deer

These animals are icons of Canada, and standing taller than a horse at the shoulder, it is easy to see why. Canadian moose are the largest species of deer in the world, and they can be found in forests across the country.

Hardy and adaptable, moose can traverse even the roughest terrain, navigating trees, mountains, bogs and deep snow. They are also skilled swimmers, and are known to dive more than five metres (16.4 feet) below the surface of lakes and rivers in search of the tasty aquatic plants that lurk at the bottom.

One of the best times to spot moose in Canada is during the spring and summer, when the animals can often be seen in and around the water as they feast on the abundant plant life. The mating season, or 'rut' happens in September and October, and is marked by loud calls and dramatic sparring displays. Moose are most active during the early morning and evening.

See polar bears migrate across the ice

There are between 13,000 and 15,000 polar bears living in Canada, making it one of the best places to see the world's largest land predator in the wild.

Polar bears have a keen sense of smell, and can find a seal's breathing hole from almost a kilometre (0.62 miles) away. They have a preference for ringed seals, and will sit and wait for an hour or more until the unsuspecting animal surfaces for air.

One of the best places to get up close and personal with a polar bear in Canada is Churchill, Manitoba. It is one of the only places where these magnificent animals come close to a human settlement, making it the perfect base for travellers looking to catch a glimpse of these skilled snow predators.

The best time to visit is in the autumn, between the months of October and November. At this time the bears travel back to their winter hunting territory on the pack ice around Hudson Bay. Tundra vehicles can carry passengers safely out into bear territory, while fenced lodges allow tourists to live in the midst of the migration.

Churchill is also one of the prime den locations for polar bears in Canada, with females returning time after time to give birth to and raise their cubs.

While you're there



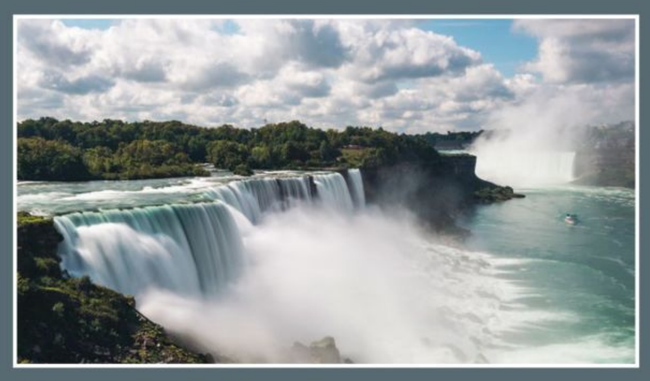
Calgary Stampede

Each July, Calgary celebrates its Western heritage with a huge rodeo and festival, featuring a parade, shows, races and concerts.



Northern lights

The northernmost provinces of Canada sit inside the Arctic Circle, offering a chance to see the stunning aurora borealis. This natural light show is caused by solar wind interacting with Earth's magnetic field.



Niagara Falls

The iconic trio of waterfalls is in Ontario. On average, around 2,867,450 litres (757,500 gallons) of water rush over the falls every second.



Old Québec

This 400-year-old city is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Within its walls, architecture can be dated back to the 17th and 18th centuries.



Bay of Fundy

This bay in Nova Scotia hosts some of the world's most extreme tides, with the sea level rising by 15 metres (50 feet) at high tide.

Find wolf tracks in the snow

Packs of grey wolves could once be found across North America, but their range is now significantly smaller. Canada is now home to the second largest population of wolves in the world, after Russia, with around 60,000 individuals found mainly in the unpopulated parts of British Columbia, Labrador, the Yukon Territory, and the Northwest Territories.

They live in packs with a strict social hierarchy, headed by a dominant male and female pair. They are territorial, and work together as a team to take down prey several times their own size, including iconic Canadian animals like moose, elk, and musk oxen.

Wolves patrol large ranges, and are a challenge to spot in the wild. During the winter, their dark fur stands out against the white blanket of snow, and their tracks are much easier to see on the ground.

Walk through bear country

There are an estimated 380,000 black bears in Canada, found most easily in the untouched forest wildernesses of British Columbia and Alberta. They rely on the trees for cover, and are good climbers, so they often remain hidden from public view, but in some areas they can be found very close to humans. Black bears can be spotted in the valleys of mountain parks, where there are breaks in the forest, and they can sometimes be seen at the roadside.

Around 85% of a black bear's diet is vegetarian, but they do eat meat, and they are efficient scavengers. They are notorious food thieves, and people are strongly advised to minimise food smells in and around their camps when staying close to these animals. Cooking should be done at least 50 metres (164 feet) downwind of the sleeping area, dishes should be thoroughly washed, and food and waste should be secured in bear-proof containers, hanging in trees away from the main camp.

Listen out for elk



These large and impressive deer are extremely vocal. During the mating season in the autumn, they are often heard before they are seen. Calves are born between May and July and spend several weeks hidden in the undergrowth. But during the late summer, females and their new calves rejoin the herds.



Spot beluga whales swimming off the coast

Beluga whales are intelligent and playful mammals. Their thick layer of blubber provides insulation to protect them from chilly waters. In the summer, they can be found in and around the Northwestern Territories, and are often spotted in the Mackenzie River estuary. As ice builds up in the winter, they move south to the Bering Sea.

As well as belugas, Canada's coastal waters are home to more than 30 whale species. Most are found in the Atlantic Ocean, off the east coast, but Tadoussac, Quebec, is a great spot for whale-watching. The water flow in this area is the perfect breeding ground for krill, and in the late summer, this attracts hungry whales from miles around.



Go birdwatching

Canada is a haven for birdlife. Newfoundland and Labrador are great birdwatching spots, with over 350 different species of bird nesting in this area, including gannets, storm-petrels and numerous birds of prey including hawks, ospreys and owls.

A particular highlight is the Atlantic puffin, the smallest of all puffin species. It spends most of its life at sea, but it comes onto land to breed from May to August. Once on dry land, this monogamous bird's beak changes to bright orange and yellow to attract its mate. The female lays one egg and the pair takes turns incubating the egg and then rearing the chick. Puffins mate for life, and each year they return to the same spot to nest.

For the best sightings of puffins, take a guided boat tour or rent a boat and visit Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, home to North America's largest Atlantic puffin colony.

Canadian icons



Canada goose

These migratory birds breed in Canada in the summer, before flying south to shelter from the harsh winter temperatures. They can be spotted in grassy fields.



North American beaver

These distinctive rodents are some of nature's greatest architects. They use logs and branches to construct elaborate homes next to water, before plastering their creations with mud for added protection.



North American porcupine

Porcupines have thousands of hollow quills. They would rather run away than start a fight, but when backed into a corner their spiky armour stands on end.



Arctic hare

Arctic hares' stocky bodies and short ears help to keep their core temperature steady, and they are covered in very thick, insulating fur to stay warm.



Atlantic salmon

Salmon spend their adult lives at sea, but return to their home river to lay their eggs. Each autumn, they can be seen making their dramatic climb against the water flow.

Become a deer spotter

The Rocky mountains are home to large populations of mule deer, a petite species with prominent ears. They are smaller than moose or elk, but males can have large, impressive antlers.

Mule deer are found alongside another small deer species, the white-tailed deer, but the two can be easily distinguished by their colouration. Mule deer have white tails with a distinctive black tip, while white-tailed deer have buff or tan tails with a completely white underside.

Mule deer are picky eaters with more delicate digestive systems than other ruminants. They only forage on plant material with a high nutrient content, avoiding the low-calorie grasses eaten by other Canadian herbivores. They are found in dry and rocky areas where there are many varieties of shrub, and lots of new plant growth to choose from.

Kayak with orcas

Canada provides a perfect opportunity to see the orca – also known as the killer whale – in its natural environment. This large marine mammal weighs up to seven tons and can measure up to 9.5 metres (30 feet), almost the size of a school bus. It can easily be identified because of its long dorsal fin and black and white colouring.

Orcas are very social animals and tend to live in pods of up to 50 animals. If you are able to splash out, take a guided kayaking tour to the northeastern point of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to catch a glimpse of these marine giants from a safe distance.

Top tips

Travelling by road
If you want to venture out of the cities and into the wilderness, access to a car is almost essential. Remember to drive on the right-hand side of the road, and watch out for moose.

Where to see polar bears
Churchill, Manitoba is described as the 'polar bear capital of the world'. It is also a great place to spot beluga whales, and to see the northern lights.

Bear safety
If you visit the Rocky or Columbia mountains, you will be sharing your holiday with grizzly and black bears. Use marked trails, carry bear spray, and make noise to let them know you are coming.

Must-have items



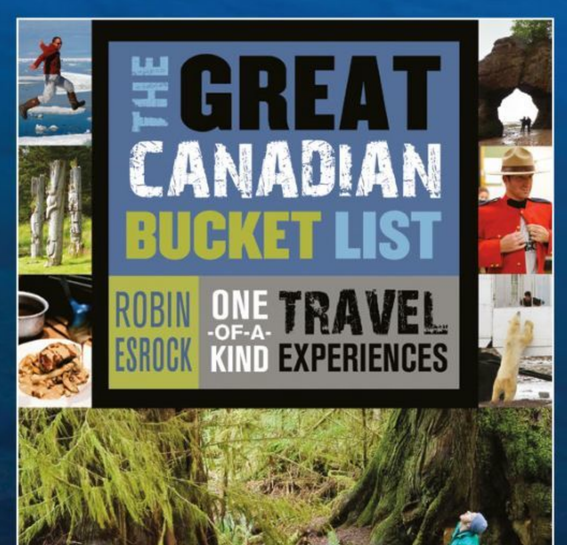
Base layer
The temperature in Canada can vary. A Merino wool base layer will keep you warm, while still allowing your skin to breathe.



Backpack
If you're heading out on foot, make sure you have a comfortable backpack to carry all the essentials for a single or multi-day trek.



Water bottle
A durable water bottle will ensure that you stay hydrated. Look for models that are leakproof to avoid any accidental spills in your bag.



Travel guides
Get inspired by the adventures and travels of others. Pick up a few books on the very best Canadian experiences.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Wildlife Trails
WILDLIFETRAILS.CO.UK

Budget Polar Bear Safari in Churchill
7-day tour including tundra buggy trips to spot polar bears. From £2,900pp (~$3,700).

Family
Explore
EXPLORE.CO.UK

Family Canadian Adventure
Two weeks of whale watching, glacier tours and much more. From £2,499pp (~$3,200).

Luxury
Natural World Safaris
NATURALWORLDSAFARIS.COM

An Arctic Wilderness Safari
A nine-day safari led by a wildlife specialist. From £9,050pp (~$11,550).



Costa Rica

Located on a narrow strip of land where the plants and animals of North and South America can mingle, this enchanting country is one of the most biologically diverse places in the world, and a must-visit for any nature lover

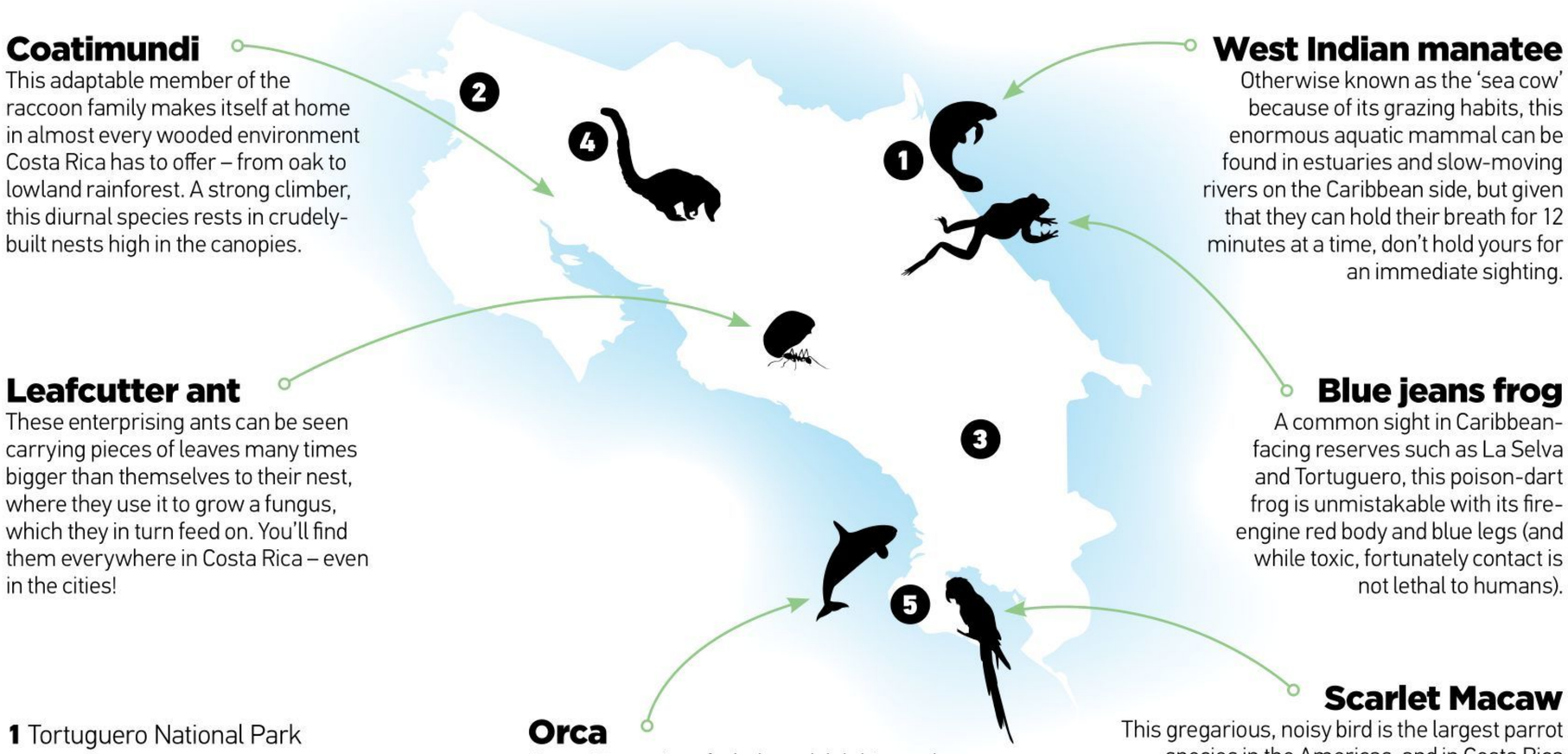
Words **Alex Dale**

Travel expert

Sarah Mayo's natural curiosity about the world inspired her to pursue a degree in tourism, and she is now the marketing director for Costa Rica Experts

"Costa Rica has so many unique opportunities to see animals in their natural environment. Its year-round tropical climate is a hotbed of biodiversity ideally suited for regeneration and renewal. From the gregarious wildlife of the rainforest canopy to the migrating marine life that frequents the coast, scientists and wildlife enthusiasts from around the world flock to catch a glimpse of the perplexing animal behaviours and sophisticated ecosystems of Costa Rica.

Hike through the remote rainforests of the Osa Peninsula, or go birding in the Monteverde Cloud Forest in search of the elusive resplendent quetzal bird. Explore Marino Ballena National Park, where humpback whales come to breed and raise their young. And don't miss Tortuguero, home to the mass annual sea turtle nesting known as arribada."



Coatimundi
This adaptable member of the raccoon family makes itself at home in almost every wooded environment Costa Rica has to offer – from oak to lowland rainforest. A strong climber, this diurnal species rests in crudely-built nests high in the canopies.

West Indian manatee
Otherwise known as the 'sea cow' because of its grazing habits, this enormous aquatic mammal can be found in estuaries and slow-moving rivers on the Caribbean side, but given that they can hold their breath for 12 minutes at a time, don't hold yours for an immediate sighting.

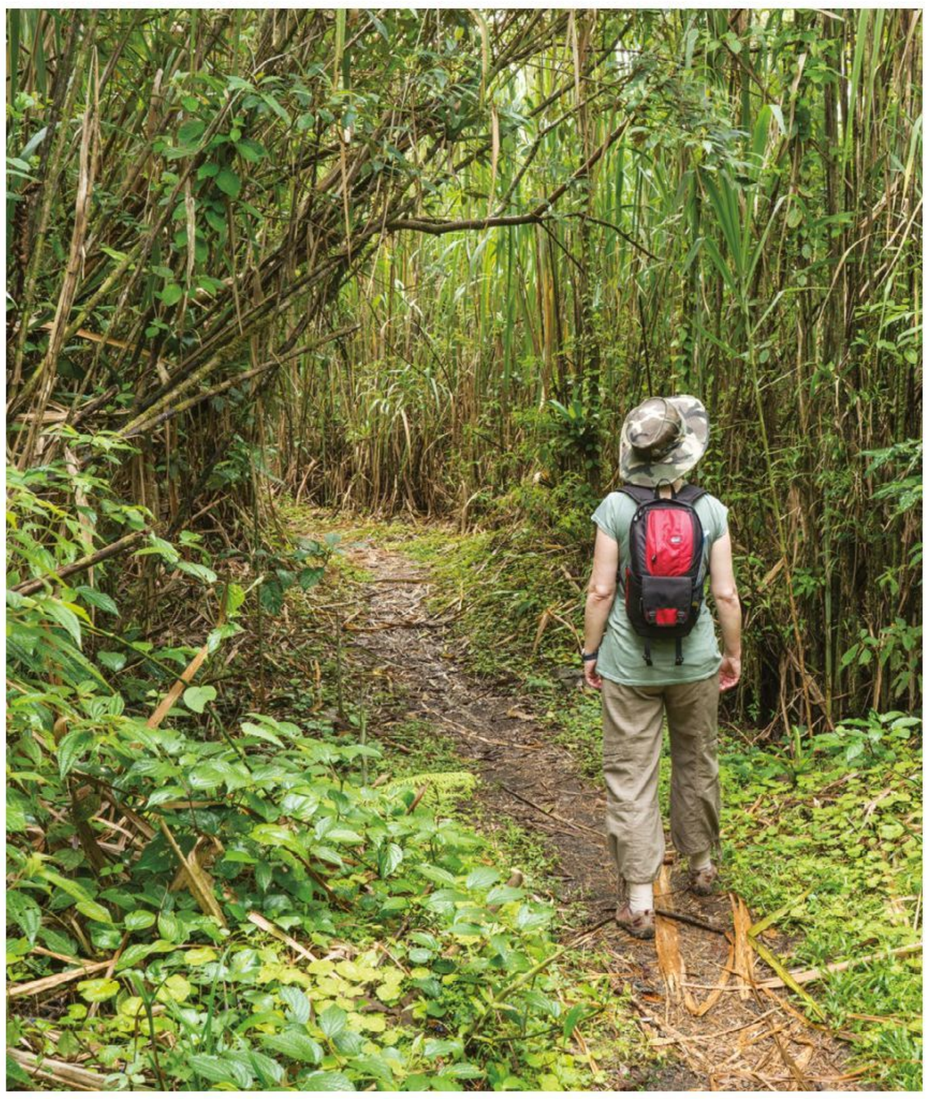
Leafcutter ant
These enterprising ants can be seen carrying pieces of leaves many times bigger than themselves to their nest, where they use it to grow a fungus, which they in turn feed on. You'll find them everywhere in Costa Rica – even in the cities!

Blue jeans frog
A common sight in Caribbean-facing reserves such as La Selva and Tortuguero, this poison-dart frog is unmistakable with its fire-engine red body and blue legs (and while toxic, fortunately contact is not lethal to humans).

1 Tortuguero National Park
2 Santa Rosa National Park
3 Chirripó National Park
4 Arenal Volcano National Park
5 Corcovado National Park

Orca
Some 25 species of whale and dolphin can be seen in Costa Rica's waters. Drake Bay, on the north side of the Osa Peninsula, is a hotspot; here you can find orcas, short-finned pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins.

Scarlet Macaw
This gregarious, noisy bird is the largest parrot species in the Americas, and in Costa Rica is largely restricted to the forests of the Osa Peninsula. They flock in large numbers, travelling long distances in their hunt for fruits and nuts in the rainforest treetops.



Travel guide

When to go
Visit in high season (December to April) as rainfall can render rural roads to some national parks impassable at other times.

How to get there
You can travel direct from London to the capital, San José, which is central and has good access to the Osa Penisula.

The weather
It rains a lot throughout the year, even in high season, but temperatures are consistent year round.

What to take
Insect repellent is essential. Costa Rica is not in a high-risk malarial zone, but there are occasional zika virus outbreaks.

What you'll see
Costa Rica crams a huge number of ecosystems into a small area, including places where rainforest meets beach.

Bow to the quetzal, sacred bird of the Mayans

With its glittering plumage and dramatic tail streamers, the resplendent quetzal's striking appearance makes it appear like a deity among birds – and for many centuries, the region's indigenous people treated it as such.

The resplendent quetzal was sacred to both the Aztec and the Mayan people, who considered the bird a symbol of light and goodness. The bird found expression in local mythology in the form of Quetzalcoatl the wind god, commonly depicted as a feathered serpent adorned with the bird's stunning plumes. Its feathers were considered a symbol of wealth, and high priests and rulers would often decorate themselves with the quetzal's tail feathers.

In the present day, these reclusive birds can be difficult to spot, but the mountain forests of Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and San Gerardo de Dota valley offer the greatest odds. The former is one of the most famous quetzal habitats in the world. The best time to visit is during nesting season from February to May, when pairs retreat to higher elevations to find suitable holes in the avocado trees in which to lay their eggs. Local guides will be able to steer you in the direction of popular nesting sites – from a respectable distance on the park's network of suspension bridges, of course.



Go eye-to-eye with nature's wonders on a night hike

As the sun sets on Costa Rica, the day is only just beginning for the country's rich tapestry of nocturnal wildlife – from sloths to scorpions, owls to olingos – the tree-dwelling distant relatives of the raccoon.

Thankfully, these wonders are by no means inaccessible to travellers. Numerous places throughout the country, such as the Arenal Oasis Eco Lodge and Wildlife Refuge north-west of the capital San José, operate night walks.

It's in these circumstances that you will have the best chance of encountering one of Costa Rica's most famous inhabitants, and someone who looks like they've had a few late nights on the town: the red-eyed tree frog.

This tree frog is curiously difficult to spot during the day, as it sleeps stuck to the bottom-side of leaves, camouflaging itself by concealing its bright stomach and limbs. When threatened by a predator, it uses its conspicuous colouring as a defensive mechanism, suddenly snapping its vivid scarlet eyes open and flashing its orange webbed feet, startling the threat long enough for the frog to make a hop for safety.

More than wildlife



Stone spheres

An assortment of more than 300 boulders that were sand-polished into smooth spherical sculptures by the Diquis people 500 to 1,500 years ago.



San José Central Market

Established in 1880, this bustling market takes in tens of thousands of visitors on a daily basis, and its narrow alleys pack in over 200 different stalls and restaurants.



Coffee tour

Coffee production plays a key role in Costa Rica's economy. Plantation tours such as those organised by Café Britt show your gourmet coffee's journey from bean to cup.



Guaitil Pottery Studio

The village of Guaitil has a pottery-making heritage that dates back thousands of years. Descendants of the Chorotega tribe will teach you to craft clay pots by hand.



Gold Museum artefacts

Based in downtown San José, the pre-Columbian museum holds a collection of more than 1,600 golden artefacts crafted by indigenous Latin American cultures.

Watch turtles lay eggs on the remote Tortuguero beach

Tortuguero ('Land of Turtles') is possibly the most important turtle-nesting site in the Western Hemisphere. Species such as the hawksbill, giant leatherback, loggerhead and the endangered green sea turtle (pictured) lay their eggs across the region's 35.4 kilometres (22 miles) of protected beach.

There is plenty for nature lovers to see and do in Tortuguero and the surrounding National Park; for example, a tour boat ride through the neighbouring creeks and lagoons, where you can catch sight of caimans, river otters and – if you're lucky – the West Indian manatee.

The feature attraction, however, occurs between April and October, where guided tours take you to nesting sites under the blanket of night, where female green sea and leatherback turtles arrive to lay their eggs. Visit between November and January and you'll likely miss the parents, but take a stroll across the beach in the late evening when temperatures begin to cool and you might catch sight of freshly hatched baby turtles darting to the sea.

Go on the prowl for the jaguar

Once widespread across Costa Rica, the graceful and deadly jaguar has seen its range and numbers plummet in recent times, due to poaching and deforestation. Today, it can only be found in the country's protected forest reserves, such as Corcovado National Park, Santa Rosa National Park and the Rio Mache Forest Preserve. Even then, this elusive predator can be difficult to pin down. The best time to go on a guided tour is during the rainy season (June to July), when the jaguar is at its most active.

The jaguar is the largest feline in the Americas, and worldwide it is dwarfed only by lions and tigers. It is a feared and versatile hunter, capable of taking to the trees and water, and it has the most powerful bite in the cat family, capable of piercing through skulls and the armour of reptilian species such as caimans or turtles. Fortunately, jaguar attacks on humans are almost unheard of.

Sniff around for tapirs



The Baird's tapir is the size and shape of a pig and has the prehensile trunk of an elephant, but it's actually more closely related to horses and rhinos. It's Costa Rica's biggest land mammal, and its range is restricted to protected forest land such as Corcovado, Monteverde and Santa Rosa National Park. It is most active at dawn and dusk, when it goes foraging for fruits on the forest floor. Although the tapir moves with a silent grace that belies its stocky appearance, tour guides find it easy to track down because they rarely roam far from water sources.

Hang out with the sloth

These notoriously, well, slothful, creatures can be found lazing in tree canopies throughout Costa Rica. You'll have to move slowly to catch sight of one, as the moss that grows across their coarse fur can make them difficult to spot against their surroundings. The Sloth Sanctuary, located south of Limon, offers a canoe trip that takes you into the heart of their preferred rainforest habitat.



Discover the butterfly that disappears before your eyes

Costa Rica is home to more than 1,200 species of butterfly, of which the striking blue morpho is the most famous. It calls the tropical forests home, where it can be surprisingly well-hidden, since it spends much of its time on the forest floor with its wings closed – the undersides are a rather more understated brown colour. Venture into a clearing or a stream, however, and the vivid blue flashes of a morpho in flight is unmistakeable. It appears to blink in and out of existence as it beats its half-blue, half-brown wings.

Know your toucan



Keel-billed toucan

The most recognisable of all Costa Rica's toucan species, the highly sociable, keel-billed toucan travels around the rainforest in small flocks of a dozen or so.



Chestnut-mandibled toucan

Costa Rica's largest toucan inhabits lowland forest habitats. While the chestnut-mandibled toucan mostly dines on fruit, its versatile beak also enables it to make meals of lizards and insects.



Collared aracari

Aracaris are medium-sized members of the toucan family. They are strong fliers, darting between treetops with a shrill 'cheep-eep' call.



Fiery-billed aracari

To distinguish between the two native aracari species, check your map; the collared is typically found on the Caribbean side, the fiery-billed on the Pacific.



Emerald toucanet

Toucanets are toucans that thrive at altitude. They live in open woodland, or humid cloud forests. The emerald toucanet is one of seven species of 'mountain toucanet'.

Hike through the most 'biologically intense' place on Earth

That's how *National Geographic* describe the Osa Peninsula – a large expanse of land jutting out into the Pacific, consisting of beautiful beaches, unblemished rainforest and mangrove swamps. It is a contender for the most biologically diverse place in the world, containing 2.5% of all known species. Corcovado National Park takes up the majority of the peninsula and can't be entered without a certified guide. Hosting more than 15,000 species, the highlights are too numerous to list, but how about Central America's largest colony of scarlet macaws, for starters?

Go monkey-spotting where beach and rainforest collide

Manual Antonio may be the smallest national park in Costa Rica, but it absolutely teems with life, with more than 100 species of mammals sharing a little over 7.5 square kilometres (three square miles) of coastal rainforest. Along with Corcovado National Park to the south, it is the last stronghold of the endangered Central American squirrel monkey, a social, tree-dwelling species distinguished by the park's more common white-headed capuchin and mantled howler monkeys by its striking ruddy fur. You'll encounter different sub-species of this rare monkey in both parks – the variant found in Manual Antonio has a grey crown, while Corcovado's population boast a black cap.

Whale watching tips

Go at the right time
Drake Bay, in the Osa Peninsula, is Costa Rica's premier whale and dolphin-watching spot, with 25 different species observable year-round. The types you'll see differ from month to month – head to **drakebay.info/vidamarina.htm** for a detailed breakdown.

Pick the right conditions
If you have a choice of day, choose one where the weather is forecast to be calmer, as whales are difficult to spot in rough seas. Regardless of the weather, use plenty of sun protection because water reflects sunlight, leaving you more exposed than usual.

Avoid sea-sickness
If you're prone to seasickness, you should consider taking preventive medicine before embarking on a whale-watching boat. If you start to feel nauseous, keep your eyes fixed on the horizon, and keep yourself hydrated.

Must-have items



DSLR camera
A good camera with optical zoom and a customisable shutter speed is essential if you plan on taking photographs of whales, as these gentle marine mammals move quickly in the water.



Telephoto lens
Affixing a telephoto lens onto your DSLR camera will allow you to snap far-away whales. There's no point taking anything bulkier than this, as they'll just come out blurry due to the motion of the boat.



Binoculars
Stability issues mean there's little point taking any binoculars with a magnification higher than 7x aboard. Look for a pair that are waterproof and resistant to salt-water corrosion, and that will float if you drop them.



Polarised sunglasses
You don't want to spend your trip gawking at your camera's viewfinder. Polarised sunglasses reduce glare from the ocean and allow you to see into the water.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Llama Travel
LLAMATRAVEL.COM

Best of Costa Rica
An 11-day trip including San José, Tortuguero and the cloud forest. From £1,969pp (~$2,500).

Family
Reef & Rainforest
REEFANDRAINFOREST.CO.UK

Gentle Family Fun in Costa Rica
Perfect for families with kids aged six and up. From £2,998 per adult, £1,115 per child (~$3,850/$1,450).

Luxury
Rainbow Tours
RAINBOWTOURS.CO.UK

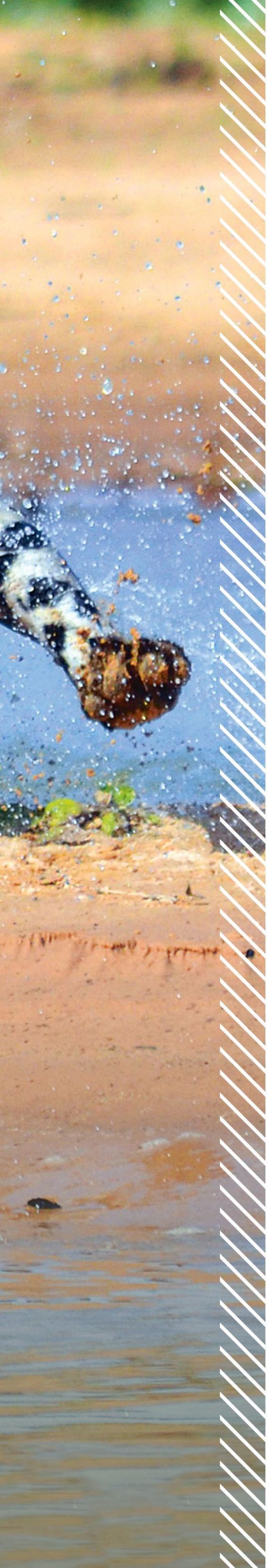
Costa Rica in Style
Visit Corcovado, Monteverde and Arenal. From £4,120pp (~$5,260), flights included.



Brazil

When it comes to biodiversity, the Southern Hemisphere's largest country is always guaranteed to take gold

Words **Adam Millward**



Travel expert

Dan Free is the manager of Wildlife Worldwide, and the travelling naturalist at The Natural Travel Collection. He first visited Brazil in 2006 and has been back many times as a guide and a tourist

"Brazil is widely regarded as one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet and provides refuge to an incredible number of species.

From the vast open grasslands of the Cerrado to the dense rainforests of the Amazonian and Atlantic Rainforest and the wetlands of the Pantanal, it is the sheer variety of habitats that make Brazil such a biodiversity hotspot. Although home to over 400 species of mammal, it is Brazil's 76 species of primate that best demonstrate the country's diversity, with a large proportion considered endemic and including such iconic species as the golden lion tamarin and South America's largest primates, the muriquis. While Brazil's rainforests boast the greatest degree of diversity, many of its gems are difficult to see. For those hoping to glimpse some of Brazil's most famed wildlife inhabitants, there can be no better place than the Pantanal, region which is the world's largest tropical wetland area."

River dolphin
Estimated to be home to one in ten of all known animal species – including river dolphins, jaguars, sloths and manatees – a trip to Brazil wouldn't be complete without a stop in the Amazon.

Brazilian tapir
Brazil's biggest mammals are one of the South American 'Big Five'. It's possible to see the full set in the lush Pantanal region.

Lion tamarin
These New World monkeys are found nowhere else on Earth. Their Atlantic rainforest home has greatly diminished, but protected pockets are helping them to stage a comeback.

Manta ray
The waters off the island of Laje de Santos are known as a hotspot for manta rays and dolphins in the summer, but year-round its reefs teem with sealife.



Green turtle
Learn about efforts to protect Brazil's sea turtles at a sanctuary in the Fernando de Noronha archipelago. Then take the plunge to see them in the wild, along with dolphins, sharks and more.

Hyacinth macaw
One of the best places to view this stunning parrot up close is in the tropical forest of southern Piaui state. This area is also home to some super-smart monkeys.

Giant anteater
Meet one of the world's oddest-looking creatures, along with several other native species, on the grassy plateaux of the Serra da Canastra.

Map key
1 Pantanal
2 Parque Nacional da Serra da Canastra
3 Atalaia Beach, Fernando de Noronha
4 Parque Nacional das Nascentes do Rio Parnaíba
5 Laje de Santos Marine State Park
6 Poço das Antas Biological Reserve
7 Amazon Rainforest

Travel guide

When to go
The best time to go will depend where you're visiting. If looking to include the Amazon and the Pantanal, the driest period is June to September.

How to get there
There are frequent flights from London to Brazil's major hubs, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paolo. From here, you can get internal flights.

The weather
The climate is hugely varied, depending on the region and season. Most of Brazil is in the tropics, so expect heat, high humidity and showers.

What to take
You may need to do a lot of travelling, so pack light. Don't forget anti-mosquito protection and a smaller bag for day trips.

What you'll see
Brazil plays host to a wide array of habitats, from cloud forest to tropical savannah – plus some of the world's fastest-growing cities.

Paddle through the Pantanal

It can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that Brazil's wildlife starts and stops at the Amazon. However, the reality is that you're far more likely to see this country's most iconic animals in its unique Pantanal region.

This vast tropical wetland – the largest of its kind on the planet at around ten times the size of Florida's Everglades – plays host to more than 150 different mammals, more than 650 types of bird, and all manner of fish, reptiles and amphibians. Some of its biggest residents – literally and figuratively – include jaguars, which grow larger here than anywhere else, Brazilian tapirs (the country's largest native mammal) and capybaras (the world's largest rodents). Other species here include macaws, armadillos, tamanduas, howler monkeys, eagles and tortoises – and that's just getting started.

Thanks to its accessibility and fairly open terrain – indeed, much of the Pantanal is used as pasture by cattle farmers – wildlife sightings are frequent – far more so than in the densely vegetated Amazon. Different tours offer various means of exploration, including horse-riding, jeep safaris and trekking, but by far the best way to experience this watery wonderland is by boat. Canoes and kayaks enable you to get much closer to the local fauna than you would on land and offer the best seat for seeing creatures drink, bathe and hunt.



Sniff out an anteater

Undoubtedly one of South America's most unusual-looking creatures has got to be the giant anteater. While these toothless insectivores are present in the Pantanal region, their nocturnal lifestyle makes them more difficult to observe. To see them in the day, you're better off heading to Parque Nacional da Serra da Canastra. Situated in central Brazil, it is part of the extensive tropical savannah, known as the Cerrado, that divides the humid east and the drier west.

As their name suggests, anteaters spend the majority of their time foraging for ants and termites – of which they consume around 30,000 per day! On locating a nest, it uses its sharp claws to break through the tough walls, before sticking in its 60-centimetre (23-inch) long tongue to scoop out as many inhabitants as it can before the stings/bites become too painful. Owing to their poor eyesight, it's possible to get surprisingly close to these endearing long-nosed oddballs. However, it's highly recommended only to do so with a professional guide, as there have been attacks by those that have felt cornered.

The unusual wildlife here doesn't stop at anteaters. The pampas terrain is also home to the maned wolf (the continent's biggest canid), giant armadillos and numerous birds, including the largest wild population of the Brazilian merganser, a critically endangered duck.

Brazilian fiestas



Rio Carnival

A colourful riot of dancing, music and parades, the world's largest carnival takes place in the lead-up to Lent each year. It's not for the faint-hearted!



New Year in Copacabana

With a reputation for being one of the best places in the world to spend New Year's Eve partying away, Copacabana beach is definitely worth a visit.



Festival of Yemanjá

Each year on 2 February in Salvador, Bahia, the locals dress in white and gather at the shore, where, tributes are presented to the goddess of the sea, Yemanjá.



Oktoberfest

Odd as it may sound, the Oktoberfest held in Blumenau is one of the largest to take place outside Germany. It is inspired by the city's immigrant founders.



Parintins Folklore Festival

This Amazonian celebration, which falls in June, revolves around the story of a resurrected ox. Two teams engage in a fierce contest to re-enact the legend.

Visit a natural aquarium

Picture paradise in your mind's eye and you'll probably imagine something like Fernando de Noronha. This string of volcanic islands off Brazil's northern coast offers some of the best marine life not just in this continent but the world. One of the star attractions are its chelonians, which include both green and hawksbill turtles. Although it's possible to see them in the wild year-round, as well as learn about their conservation at the TAMAR Project's open-air museum, visit between December and July to have the chance of witnessing baby green turtles hatching at protected sites such as Leão Beach.

Elsewhere, at Baia dos Golfinhos, you can enjoy the acrobatic displays of spinner dolphins, while the islands' numerous underwater caves shelter nurse sharks, octopuses, moray eels and crustaceans, among many other reef-dwellers. For those who'd rather snorkel than dive, put Atalaia Beach at the top of your list. The retreating waters at low tide leave behind a huge shallow pool, brimming with all manner of sea life. To enter this natural aquarium, you must first obtain a permit; even then, it's worth getting here early because daily visitor numbers are capped to help preserve this unique sanctuary.

Swim with manta rays

From May to July, the waters off the island of Laje de Santos near São Paolo see gatherings of one of the ocean's most graceful creatures. Manta rays are the largest species of ray, with wingspans reaching up to six metres (19.6 feet) – that's about as wide as a giraffe is tall! For diving enthusiasts, the chance to see these gentle giants gliding through the sea, mouths agape as they feast on plankton, is an opportunity not to be missed.

Discover a new toad



In 2015, scientists found seven new species of saddleback toads in Brazil's Atlantic rainforest. Each of these tiny brightly coloured toads is limited to one or two mountains, as the rapid decline of cloud forests has left them cut off in isolated communities. The researchers are confident that "the total number of Brachycephalus is still underestimated," just going to show that it's still possible to discover brand-new species in the 21st century. If you do come across one while trekking, just make sure to only look and not touch.

Go nuts over macaws and monkeys

Parque Nacional das Nascentes do Rio Parnaíba may be one of Brazil's newest national parks, but that doesn't mean it's short on wild residents. This region is dominated by dry tropical forest and red sandstone cliffs – two features that make it perfect for one of South America's most iconic birds. Growing up to one metre (3.3 feet) long, hyacinth macaws are the world's largest parrot, but of course their most distinguishing feature is their vivid blue plumage. Stay at a lodge here and you'll see flocks of these beautiful birds flying at dawn and dusk. Another local has learned to make do without a beak. Brown capuchins here have been observed selecting igneous rocks from riverbeds and then using them to crush nuts against other flat rocks, much like a hammer and anvil. This use of tools is limited to only a few primates, hence why these monkeys have been causing a lot of excitement among zoologists.



Go on an Amazon adventure

With 10% of all known species living in the Amazon, it's no surprise that it's at the top of many animal-lovers' travel bucket lists. Home to everything from jaguars and tarantulas, poison-dart frogs and countless bird species, it truly is one of the world's premiere wildlife destinations. Bear in mind that what makes this such a haven for nature – the dense vegetation and vast regions of undisturbed territory – can also work against your chances of sightings. Boat tours are a tried-and-tested method that take advantage of the natural clearings provided by rivers and lagoons, letting you get up close with aquatic mammals such as river dolphins, manatees and giant otters.

However, one of the most immersive Amazon experiences is to climb up to the rainforest canopy, where much of the action takes place.

More Pantanal creatures



Marsh deer

South America's largest native deer have evolved broad hooves and impressive jumping skills to help get around their water-logged habitat.



Giant river otter

You're more likely to hear these critters before you see them, with barks, growls and snorts being just a few ways that they communicate.



Yellow anaconda

Slightly smaller than its green cousin, this ambush predator can nonetheless reach up to 4.5 metres (15 feet) in length.



Yacare caiman

If you're guaranteed to see anything in the Pantanal, it's these guys. When not hunting for fish like piranha, you'll likely see caiman basking in the sun on river banks.



Greater rhea

Traditionally a forest-dweller, small families of these emu-like birds also build their nests on the Pantanal's floodplains and the pastures bordering the swamps.

Look for lions in the trees

Okay, so we're not talking big cats here but monkeys with rather leonine faces, known as lion tamarins. The world's only four species of this New World monkey live exclusively in Brazil's Atlantic rainforest. Although their habitat has drastically shrunk over the last century, there are signs that they are making a comeback. Protected areas like the Poço das Antas Biological Reserve – just a couple of hours from Rio de Janeiro – provide the perfect opportunity to see these creatures in the wild and also learn about the conservation efforts going in to saving them.

Go butterfly watching

Both budding and seasoned lepidopterists will be blown away by the sheer variety of butterflies in Brazil. A prime location is the Alta Floresta region in the southern Amazon, which thanks to its position straddling the Pantanal and the Cerrado encompasses two major biomes. Some 1,600 species of butterfly have been officially documented here, but some estimates put the count closer to 2,000. As well as showstoppers like the blue morpho, green mantle and painted beauty, endemics include the Hahnel's Amazonian swallowtail and the yellow kite.

Top tips

Keep tabs on health risks
As of March 2020, Brazil is still considered a risk area for Zika virus transmission. Be sure to check the latest foreign travel advice, or check with your GP before booking. Due to recent problems with tap water supplies in Rio de Janeiro, make sure you stick to bottled water.

Be soccer savvy
Football is more of a religion than a sport in Brazil, so be prepared for many a conversation to begin "Qual é a sua equipe?" (essentially "Which football team do you support?"). And if you're going to wear a football shirt, you'll be expected to have the lowdown on all the latest games and players.

Eat by the kilo
A novel dining experience in Brazil's cities are 'kilo restaurants', where you pay based on not what you eat but how much it weighs. These buffet-style establishments are a great way to sample a lot of dishes in one place and also good for those on a shoestring budget.

Key kit



Waterproof phone case
Not only do these cases offer peace of mind when out on the water, but they still allow you access to all your device's functions, so you're able to chat, use apps and take photographs.



Comfy shoes
Immediately feel at home when you step off the plane by taking a comfortable pair of flip-flops or sandals. Perfect for the hot weather while on trips to see wildlife on the shore (or simply enjoying Brazil's beaches!)



Day bag
For short excursions, take a light backpack that's large enough to pack all the essentials you'll need. Look for a bag with padded shoulder straps to make sure it's comfortable to wear all day.



Water purifier
If you're heading out on a trek and access to safe drinking water isn't guaranteed, a water purifier could be a life-saving piece of kit. These clever devices can filter out more than 99% of harmful bacteria and viruses in water.



Virtual travel guide
Look for virtual guides, such as Triposo's Brazil Travel Guide, which are packed with useful information. Some include offline maps, currency converters and phrase books to help you on your trip.

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Who to travel with

Family
Real World Holidays
REALWORLDHOLIDAYS.CO.UK

Brazil – Amazon Adventure
10-day Amazon-focused tour. From £2,150pp (~$2,750).

Budget
Eco Adventures Travel
ECOADVENTURES.COM.BR

Pantanal Budget Tours
4 days exploring the Pantanal wetlands. Price quotes available upon enquiry.

Luxury
Naturetrek
NATURETREK.CO.UK

Brazilian Pantanal & Iguazú Falls
16 days in search of jaguars, giant anteaters, caiman and more. From £5,995 (~£7,660) including flights.

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The Antarctic

The Antarctic is one of the most pristine environments on the planet. Voyages into this isolated wilderness offer animal enthusiasts a chance to see Earth at its wildest

Words **Laura Mears**

Travel expert

Laurie Gough is an award-winning travel writer and has penned many books and articles about her journeys

"All morning I've been waiting on the top deck for my first glimpse of Antarctica. Then, up ahead, protruding out of the black waters and a bank of low-lying clouds, stands a pure white range of icy mountains, completely covered in snow. I've arrived at the least known of all continents, the most dangerous, least hospitable, coldest, highest, most isolated place on Earth.

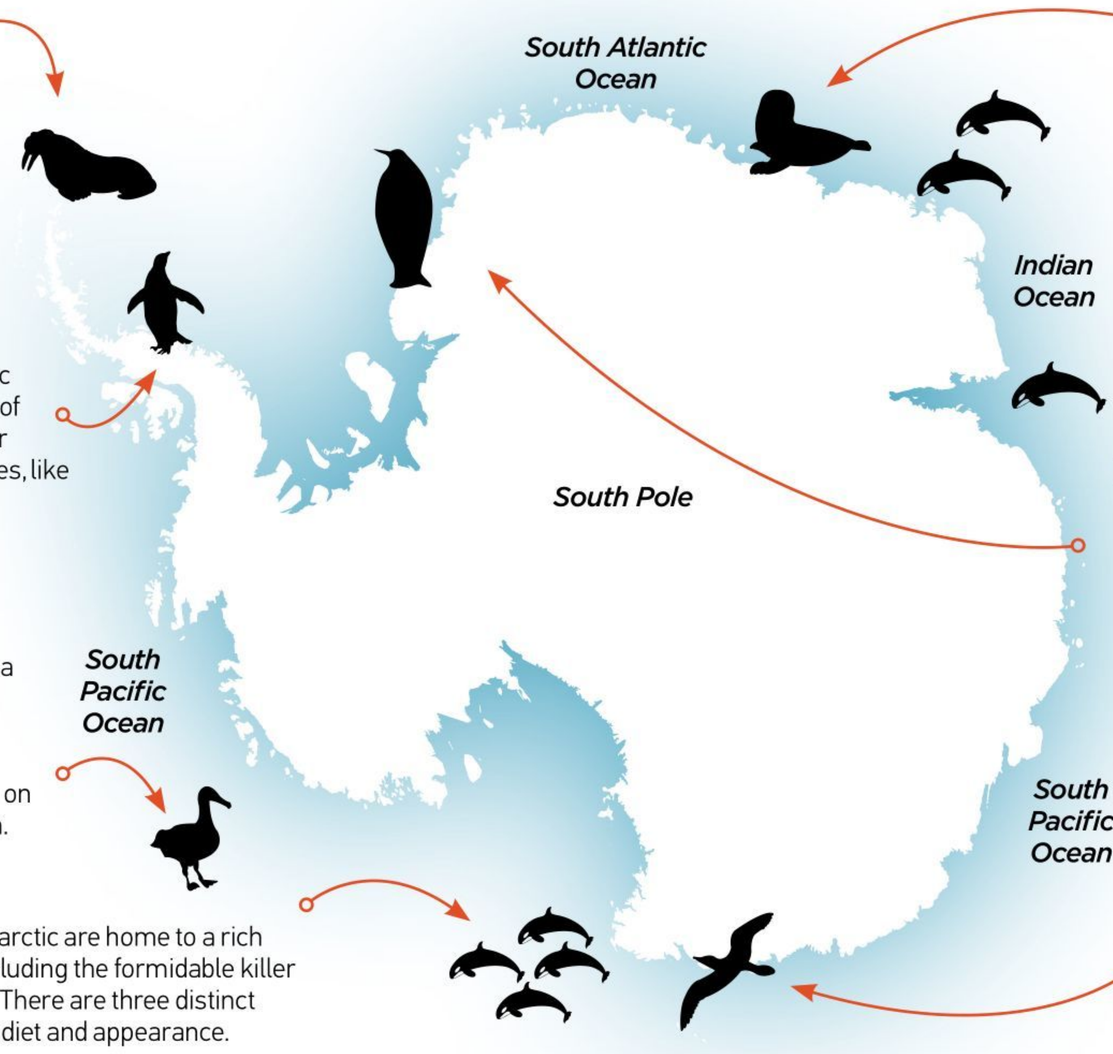
Over the coming days I see gentoo penguins, leopard seals, orcas and giant sea birds. Most exciting to me are the humpback whales, who seem curious about the ship, breaching the surface, flipping their tails, and curiously eyeing the passengers. Their underwater lives are still a mystery to scientists as they continue to sing their underwater songs."

Southern elephant seal
These imposing seals are found on most of the Sub-Antarctic islands. They breed in September, and the males compete violently to win the attention of the females.

Gentoo penguin
The rocky shores of the Antarctic Peninsula are home to colonies of waddling gentoo penguins. Their presence attracts large carnivores, like leopard seals and killer whales.

Wandering albatross
The skies surrounding Antarctica are home to the largest species of albatross, with a wingspan measuring up to 3.5 metres (11 feet). They are only usually seen on land during the breeding season.

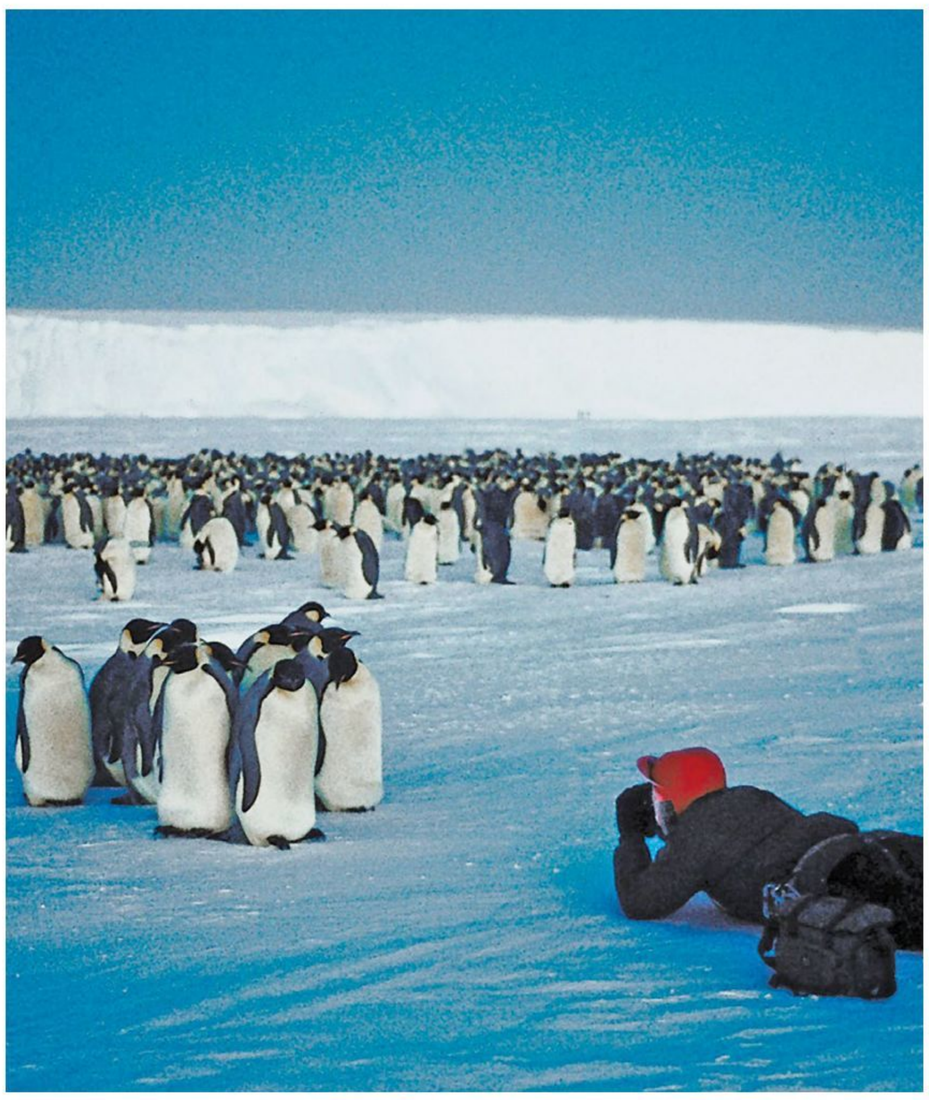
Killer whales
The waters surrounding the Antarctic are home to a rich variety of marine mammals, including the formidable killer whale (also known as the orca). There are three distinct types here, each with a different diet and appearance.



Antarctic fur seal
These seals breed mainly on the islands surrounding the Antarctic mainland, and are found in a band of warm waters known as the Antarctic Convergence. The biggest population breeds on the coasts of South Georgia.

Emperor penguin
These hardy birds are the largest penguin species, and breed during the Antarctic winter. They come ashore from late March when the pack ice starts to freeze.

Snow petrel
These little birds are hardier than they might appear. They can be found around the pack ice, where they patrol the water in search of their favourite food – krill.



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Travel guide

When to go
Visits are restricted to the summer months, (November to April), but penguin breeding season is December to February.

How to get there
Most visitors arrive by boat, but aircraft also land here. Make sure you choose a responsible tour operator.

The weather
Cold-weather gear is a must, even in summer. The weather can be unpredictable, and choppy seas can affect travel.

What to take
Clean clothes and sturdy boots are essential. All kit must be clean to avoid bringing non-native species to Antarctica.

What you'll see
Antarctica is a pristine environment, full of unusual wildlife to spot. Visitors are treated to beautiful birds and stunning views.

More than wildlife



Antarctic Ice Marathon

This extreme event takes place on Union Glacier, a part of the Antarctic mainland accessible only by air, at an altitude of 700 metres (2,300 feet).



Deception Island

This horseshoe-shaped island is actually an active volcano. The water is heated by underground activity and at the boundary with the Antarctic waters, tourists can take a dip.



Port Lockroy

Port Lockroy is a natural harbour on Goudier Island, home to gentoo penguins and the Antarctic's busiest post office. Around 70,000 cards are posted from here each summer.



King George Island

This northerly Antarctic island has more evidence of human civilisation than most other locations. It has a school, a church and a post office, as well as places for aircraft to land.



Zodiac cruise

Take a ride in a Zodiac for a chance to experience the Antarctic ice up close. These small boats can get closer to the action than larger ships.

Home of the penguins

While the Arctic is famous for its polar bears, the Antarctic is known for its penguins; five of the 17 species make their nests on the mainland or its surrounding islands. The harsh environment near to Earth's southernmost point can make the Antarctic a hostile place to raise young chicks, but these black and white birds have made the rocky shores their home.

There are no land-based predators to worry about on the Antarctic mainland, and in certain areas the weather is mild enough to support large penguin colonies. One of the main hotspots is the Antarctic Peninsula, which is home to gentoo, chinstrap and macaroni penguins. The two other species, the little Adelie penguin and the emperor penguin, are hardier, and are able to make their nests away from this protected spot.

Emperor penguins are the largest species, standing at more than one metre (3.3 feet) tall, and they are able to withstand the most extreme of conditions. They are the only species of penguin to breed during the Antarctic winter, coming on to the thick pack ice to lay and incubate their eggs. There are no nesting materials available, so the male balances the egg on his feet, keeping the developing chick away from the ice.



Spot six kinds of seal

Six of the 35 species of seal can be found in and around Antarctica, and together, they form the largest seal population on the planet. The Antarctic mainland and its surrounding islands have been cut off from the rest of the world for hundreds of thousands of years, and in this isolated environment there are no native land predators. Arctic seals have to contend with polar bears and human hunters, but here they can move on land undisturbed.

The largest Antarctic species is the southern elephant seals, which can grow to be more than four metres (13 feet) in length, and next are the leopard seals and Ross seals at around three metres (ten feet) long. Leopard seals are carnivores, and are particularly fond of gentoo penguins.

Cruises travelling through the Antarctic will give you a chance to encounter these impressive marine mammals. However, they are easily spooked by loud noises and can stay submerged for up to 15 minutes, so you'll need to be patient and keep your eyes peeled.

See the snow petrels soaring

The British Antarctic Survey describe snow petrels as "possibly the most beautiful birds in the Antarctic." They have pure-white outer feathers, delicate black beaks and eyes, and a hidden layer of fluffy black down to keep them warm.

They breed during the Antarctic summer, making their nests on cliffs and rocks, and for the remainder of the year, they tend to stick to pack ice and ice floes. Like many other Antarctic animals, they rely on the open water for food.

Snow petrels are agile in the air, and when hunting, they fly low over the open water. They feed on krill, fish, squid and crustaceans, and catch most of their food by dipping their beaks down just below the surface while still in flight. They sometimes even dive into the icy water to chase after their prey.

For birding enthusiasts, look into the two-day boat trips that run from Ushuaia, Argentina, down the Beagle Channel and across the Drake Passage. These marine voyages are ideal for spotting snow petrels and many other Antarctic birds, including terns, cormorants and fulmars.

Snap a scavenging skua

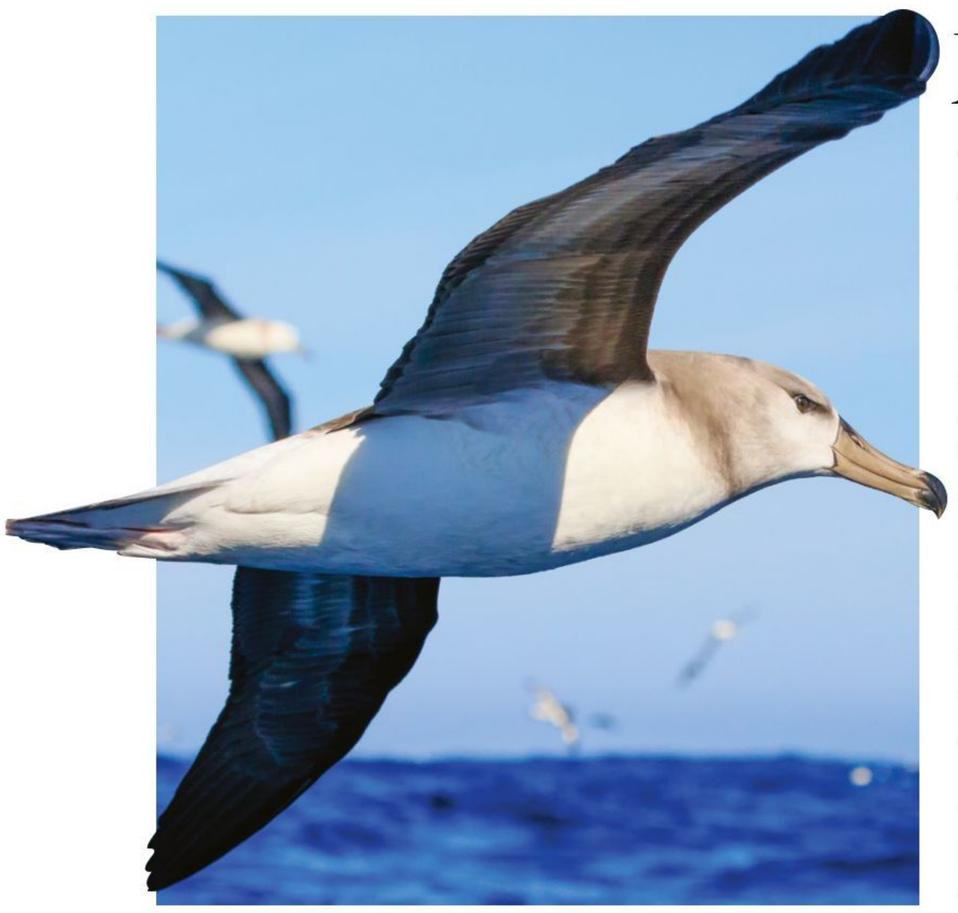


South polar skuas are the pirates of the bird world. Tough and scrappy, they chase after other sea birds and harass them until they drop their fish. Snow petrels are known to fly high over the land to avoid bumping into them. Skuas are noisy during the breeding season, making high-pitched shrieks.



Watch out for whales

There are many different species of cetaceans – whales and dolphins – found in the waters around the Antarctic during the summer. They are attracted by the nutrient-rich waters, which support a varied buffet of marine life. Some of the most common are humpback whales, minkes and orcas. Many species were hunted to the brink of extinction in the 20th century, but numbers are recovering.



Marvel at the magnificent albatross

The wandering albatross has the largest wingspan of any bird, measuring over three metres (9.8 feet) – almost twice the height of the average woman. With such impressive wings, it is no surprise that they spend most of their lives in the air.

Wandering albatrosses can live for decades, with some birds reaching their 50s or 60s. They mate for life, and return from the ocean to breed on land. Raising a chick is labour intensive, and takes about nine months, so parents will often take a year off in between successful births to recover.

The appropriately named Bird Island is one of the best places to see albatrosses in the Antarctic, but they can also be spotted around ships, where they glide over the water, waiting for fish.

Unusual Antarctic inhabitants



Toothfish
Toothfish live in some of the coldest waters on the planet. Their bodies produce special proteins that prevent their blood from freezing.



Krill
These tiny animals are one of the most important species in the Antarctic food chain. They are eaten by petrels, penguins, seals, whales and a whole host of other species.



Find the largest land animal
Very few animals live permanently on land in the Antarctic. In fact, the largest is just a few millimetres in length: the Antarctic midge.



Imperial cormorant
These birds are underwater hunters, able to dip beneath the surface of the ocean to pursue their prey. Heavy bones and low body fat also help them to dive.



Water bears
Tardigrades, or water bears, are some of the toughest animals on the planet. They can survive being dried, frozen, irradiated, and even being sent into outer space.

Spot the imposter

Antarctica might be one of the most pristine environments on the planet, but there are already some animals that shouldn't be there. King crabs, which are most commonly found off the coast of Alaska, have been spotted on the seafloor close to the Antarctic Peninsula. The large crustaceans cannot survive in waters below around one degree Celsius (33.8 degrees Fahrenheit), but with rising ocean temperatures, their territory appears to be gradually expanding. Never having encountered crabs before, other Antarctic animals are not well defended against claw attacks, and if the crustaceans manage to take hold in the area, the consequences could be devastating.

Marvel as the macaronis come ashore

These curious birds can be found on the Sub-Antarctic Islands and on the north-western Antarctic Peninsula. Easily spotted, they have bright-orange plumage for eyebrows and a crown of feathers atop their heads. Winter is spent at sea but when the chilly weather relents in October, the penguins come ashore in their hundreds of thousands to find a mate, lay eggs, and care for their young before returning to the ocean in April. Seeing the macaroni penguin colonies is a spectacular sight, so try to time your visit between these months.

Top Tips

Book last minute
A trip to Antarctica is expensive, but last minute deals can make the price easier to bear. If you are in Ushuaia, Argentina, in November or December, it's worth seeing whether there are any spare tickets.

Go with a small group
There are restrictions in Antarctica governing how many people can land at a given site. Ships carrying more than 100 people are not able to come ashore.

Clean your kit
Every island that you visit on the way to the Antarctic mainland has its own flora and fauna. Avoid transferring potentially dangerous species from one to the next by thoroughly cleaning your kit.

Must-have items



Waterproof boots
If you are setting foot on the mainland, waterproof boots are essential. Go for something knee-length, well insulated and with good grip.



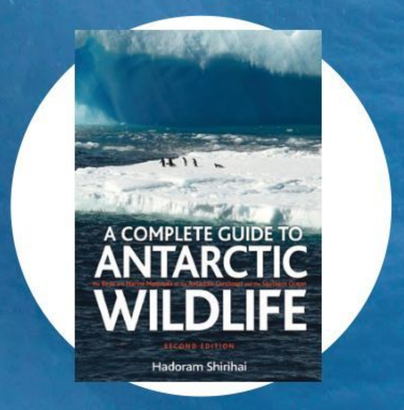
Insulated base layer
You'll need a warm, breathable base layer that wicks away moisture. Get some long-sleeved tops and long johns made from Merino wool.



Waterproof everything
Your body heat will melt the ice and snow that settles on your clothes, so make sure that your outerwear is waterproof with specialist sprays or wash-in products.



Binoculars
Once you've taken care of your body temperature, you'll be ready to enjoy the views. A pair of lightweight binoculars will be a worthwhile investment.



Read all about it
Read plenty of wildlife guides to the Antarctic. It's a great way to learn about all the amazing flora and fauna you can discover on your own adventure.

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Who to travel with

Budget
Quark Expeditions
QUARKEXPEDITIONS.COM

Antarctic Explorer: Discovering the 7th Continent
Up to 12 days in the Antarctic Peninsula, seeing penguins, whales and seals. £5,400pp (~$6,900).

Mid-range
Abercrombie and Kent
ABERCROMBIEKENT.CO.UK

Classic Antarctica
Cruising around the Antarctic coastline for 12 nights. From £11,295pp (~$14,420).

Luxury
Lindblad Expeditions
EXPEDITIONS.COM

Antarctica, South Georgia & The Falklands
The ultimate Southern Ocean experience. From ~£20,200pp ($25,750).

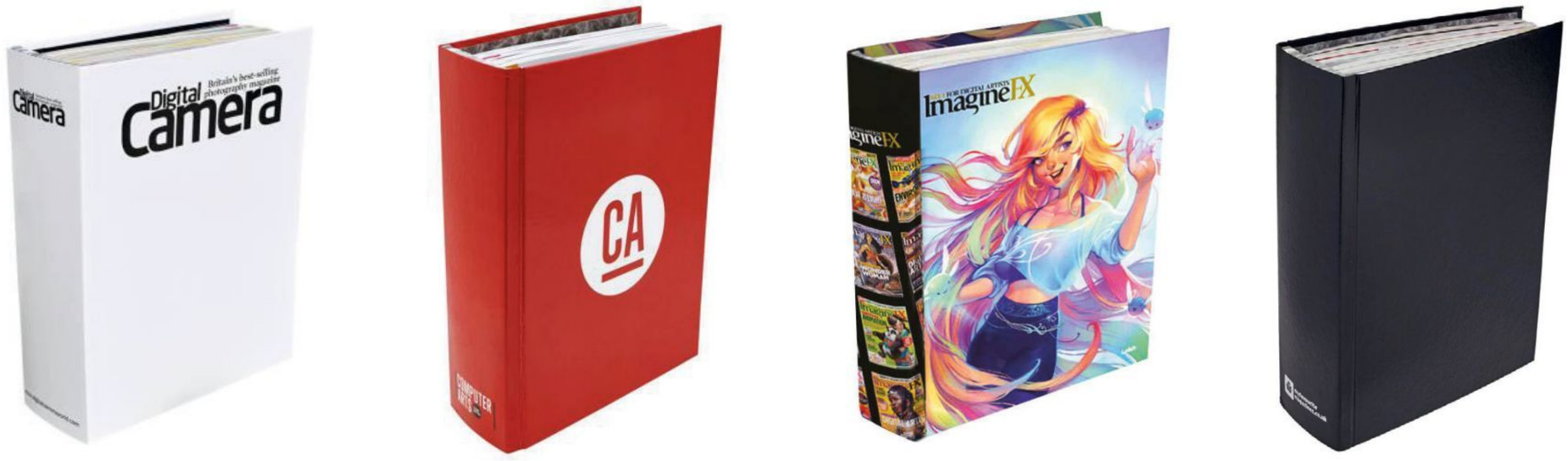
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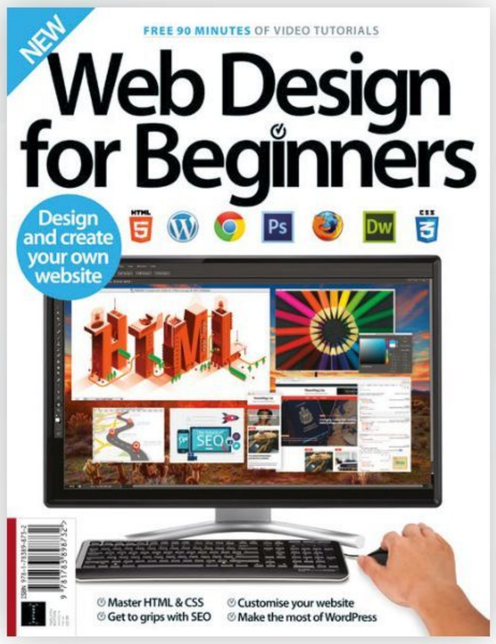


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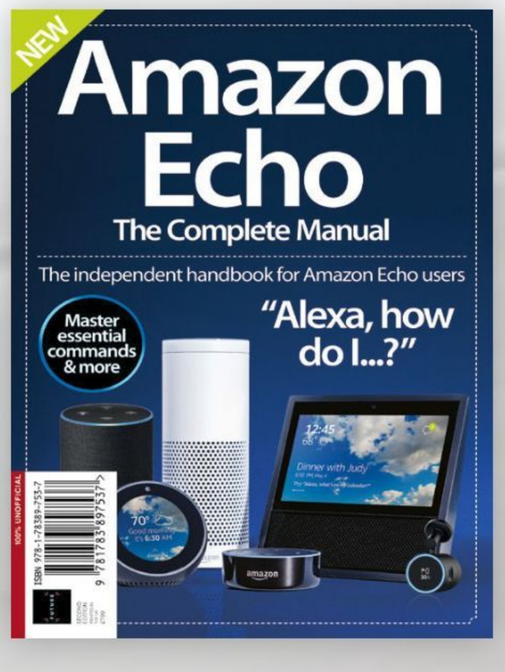




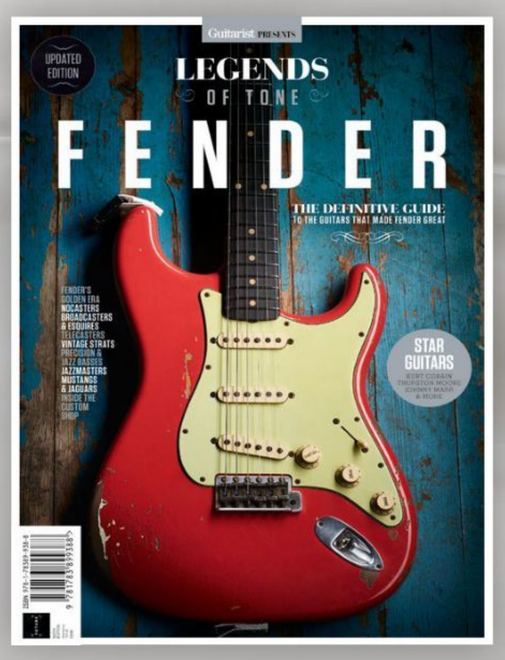
DISCOVER GREAT GUIDES & SPECIALS

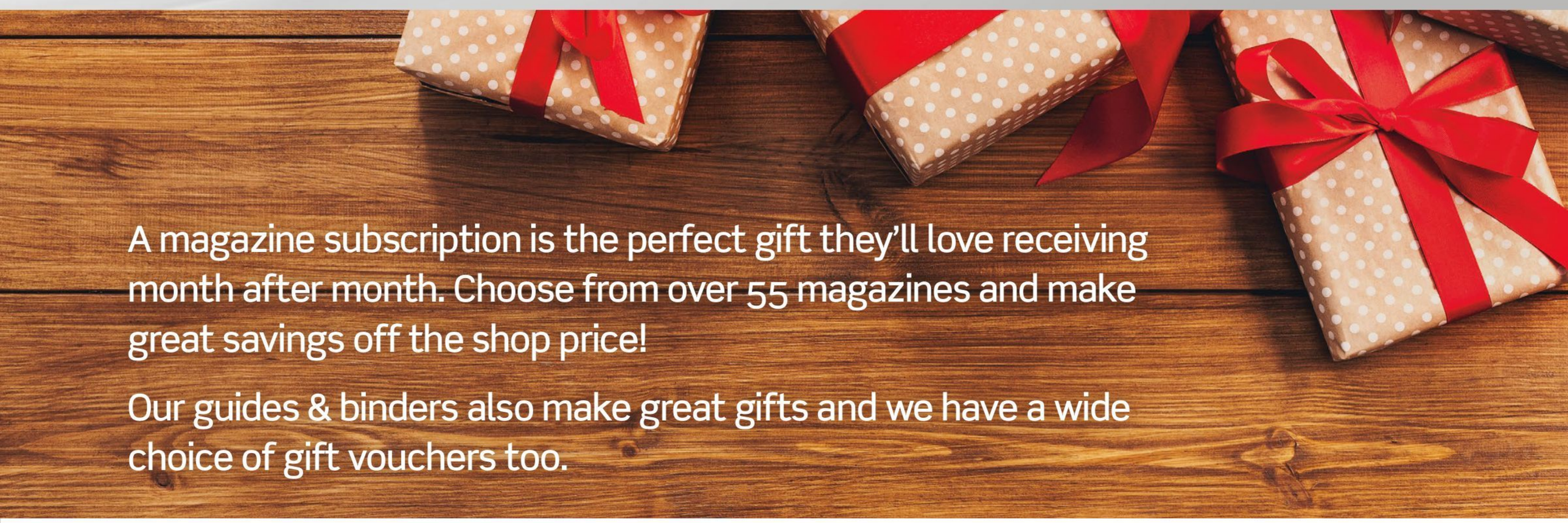
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